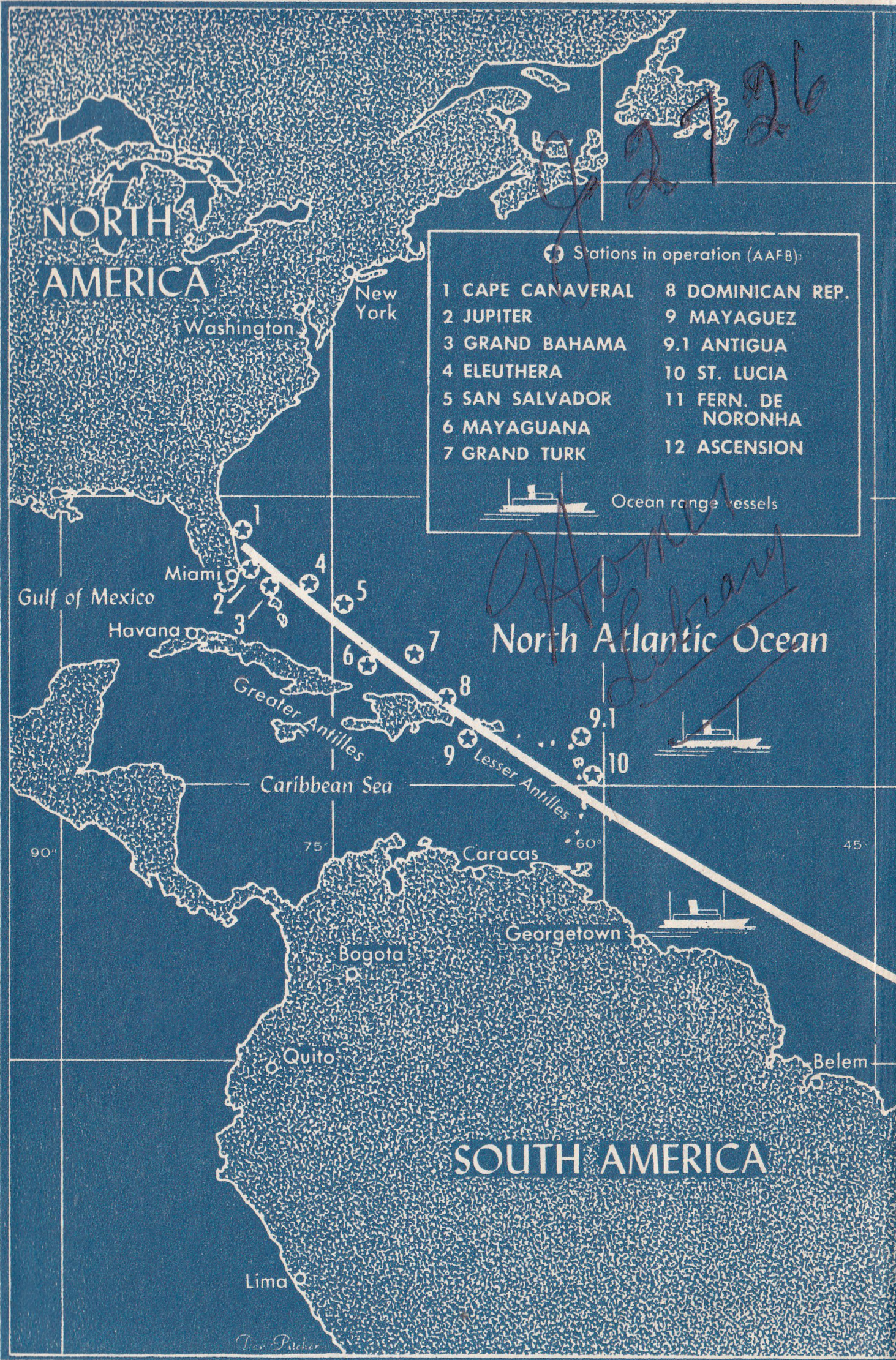




NORTH AMERICA

New York

Washington

Miami

Gulf of Mexico

Havana

Greater Antilles

Caribbean Sea

North Atlantic Ocean

Lesser Antilles

Caracas

Georgetown

Bogota

Quito

Belem

SOUTH AMERICA

Lima

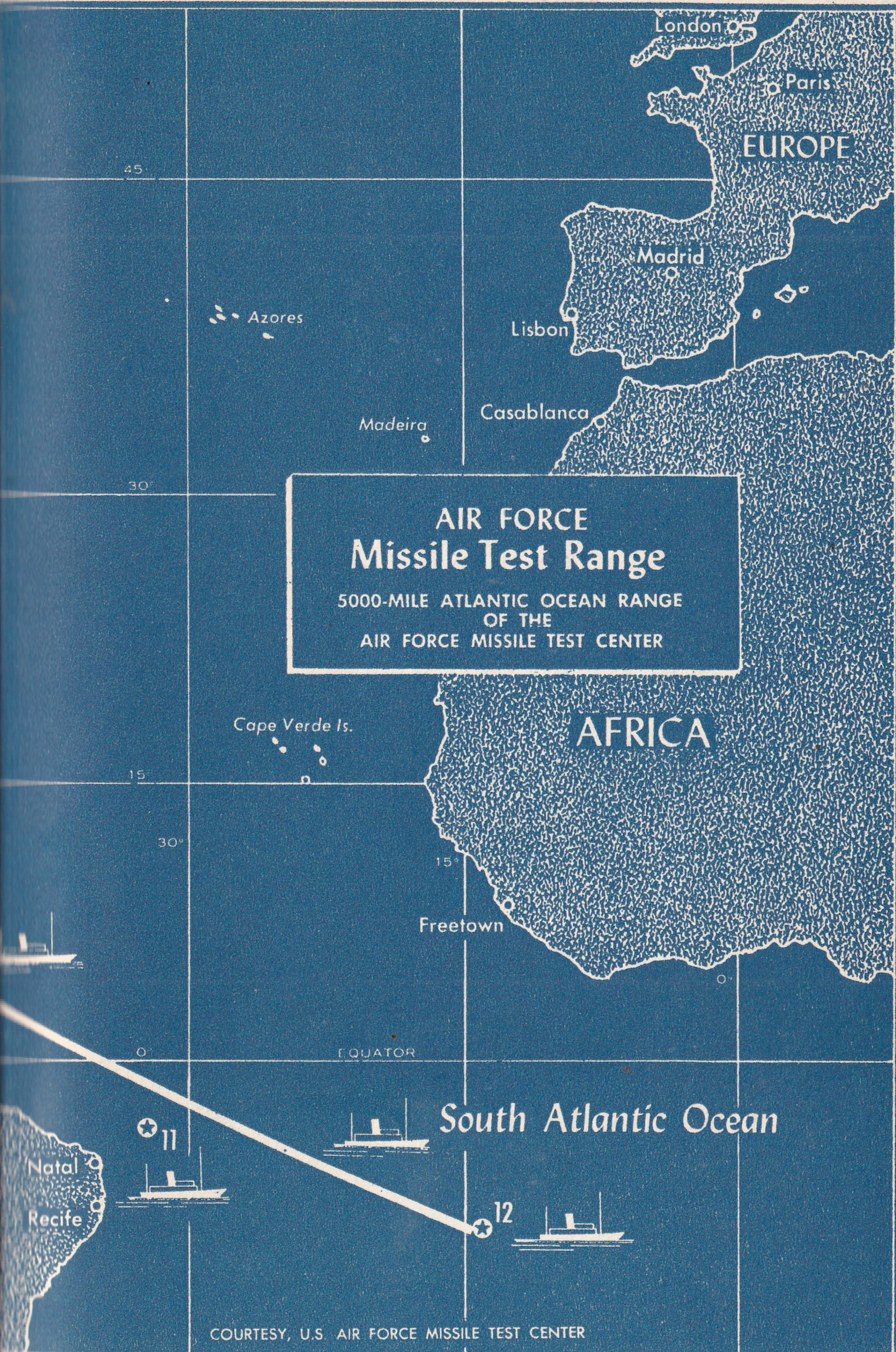
Don Pucher

Stations in operation (AAFB):

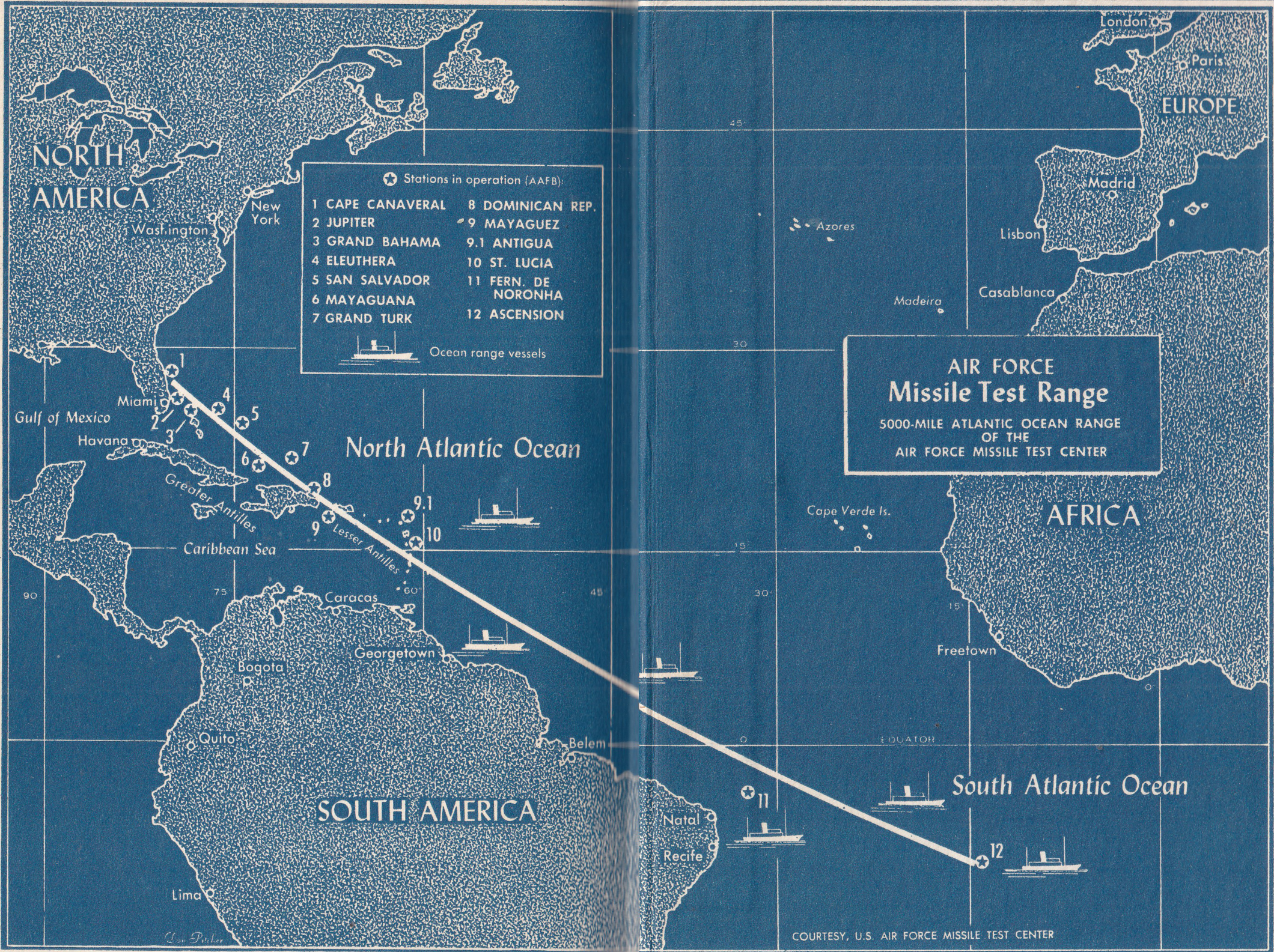
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|------------------|---------------------|
| 1 CAPE CANAVERAL | 8 DOMINICAN REP. |
| 2 JUPITER | 9 MAYAGUEZ |
| 3 GRAND BAHAMA | 9.1 ANTIGUA |
| 4 ELEUTHERA | 10 ST. LUCIA |
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| 7 GRAND TURK | |



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VAN REES PRESS • NEW YORK

For
Bill Fitch

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Contents

1. ASSIGNMENT DANGER	3
2. THE HOUSE AT PALM LANE	8
3. THE GIRL IN THE CONVERTIBLE	14
4. SIDETRACKED	25
5. DEAD END	32
6. MISSILES	44
7. BAIT	52
8. DARK HOUSE	60
9. RIVER CHASE	70
10. DOWN RANGE	78
11. VODOO	84
12. TRAIL OF THE <i>Sea Queen</i>	91
13. LONG HOP	103
14. THE BEAST	111
15. SIGNAL AT NIGHT	119
16. CAPTIVES	126
17. CLOSE QUARTERS	134
18. BIG SHOOT	142

MISSILE AWAY

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CHAPTER 1

Assignment Danger

UNDER Colonel Jefferys' cold stare, the amused smile left Kent Barstow's lips. He could not remember when he had ever seen Jefferys show any sign of amusement. He was a cold, precise machine with a mind that was as alert and sharp as a steel trap. That was why he was the head of Special Intelligence.

"I find nothing amusing in this situation," the colonel said crisply.

Kent stared back at the colonel. He respected Jefferys, but that did not mean that he liked him. The colonel was the main reason Kent Barstow was still only a first lieutenant. In this type of work a man did not move up fast, not with a chief who considered rating as unimportant.

"It struck me as amusing that I should be put on a rocket job," Kent said stiffly.

"Missile, not rocket," Jefferys corrected him. "The Atlas, an intercontinental ballistics missile. An instrument that can

deliver a warhead six thousand miles at a speed of fifteen thousand miles per hour.”

“The ICBM outfit has the tightest security in the world,” Kent answered. “What could I contribute to a setup like theirs?”

“You can check out a few things they seem to consider unimportant but which I feel could develop into a major disaster.” Colonel Jefferys leaned forward. His elbows were planted on a pile of reports that littered the top of his desk. Kent stirred in his chair. He had a feeling that his mission wasn’t going to be a simple matter of running down a few rumors.

“The last time I sent you out,” Jefferys said, “you were supposed to be on a secret mission. It turned out that quite a few people knew where you were going and what you were going to do.”

Kent nodded. The last time out he had missed being blown to bits by a very close margin. He frowned as he remembered the explosion aboard a C-97.

“The agents who managed that attempt have never been caught. They know you. This time you won’t go as a secret agent.” Colonel Jefferys stabbed at a blotter with a pencil he had picked up. The sharp point ripped through the blotter and broke. Jefferys pulled the pencil out of the blotter and scowled at it.

“You think the same gang may be mixed up in this?” Kent asked. “What can they gain? They can’t sabotage the firing of an Atlas. ARDC would simply rig up another Atlas and fire it.”

Colonel Jefferys leaned over and slipped the pencil into a sharpener screwed to his desk. He ground another point on the pencil, inspected it, then laid the pencil aside.

“I do not expect sabotage at Canaveral. I expect trouble

five thousand miles from there. It happens that ARDC has perfected a warhead that can re-enter the earth's atmosphere. We have reason to believe that we are first with such a development. Certain foreign powers would like very much to recover one of those warheads." Colonel Jefferys picked up the pencil and stabbed at the blotter again. The point ripped through the blotter and broke.

Kent had an uncomfortable feeling as he watched the colonel inspect the broken point. He was thinking about the switch knives he had encountered on his last tour of duty. A switch knife did not break off, but it slashed into flesh the way the pencil point stabbed through the blotter. He shrugged his shoulders and lifted his eyes from the broken point. He knew something about missiles. Meteors melt when they plunge into the earth's atmosphere. The Atlas warhead had to be made of very special material to resist such heat. This special mission began to mean something to him. But then with Colonel Jefferys mixed up in it it was bound to be a matter of importance. He waited for Jefferys to explain further.

"We checked out a man named Galt in connection with the Kadena mission. We found nothing at all. But I am convinced that he had some connection with the leak in my office." Jefferys looked at the pencil sharpener but did not sharpen the broken pencil point.

"Someone relayed information about that mission all the way to Tokyo," Kent said grimly, "but you plugged that leak."

Colonel Jefferys nodded. "Those fellows won't have too much trouble finding out when the firing will come off. They can check for themselves without inside connections. But they will have to have a pretty good setup to get the information

out to Ascension Island so that their crew on the range can beat our boys to the warhead.”

Kent nodded. “Radio sending outfit hid out near Canaveral, receiving setup near Ascension, and a fast boat for a getaway, possibly a plane.”

Colonel Jefferys moved the pencil back and forth with a thick finger. “The areas of operation have been combed very carefully and reported clean.” The colonel scowled. “But I still am not satisfied.”

Kent wanted to smile but didn’t. Jefferys was the sort who left nothing to chance. Some bit of information in a field report, an unrelated detail here and there, little things, had made him alert. He took a stab in the dark.

“This man, Galt, has been seen in Florida?”

“Yes,” Jefferys agreed. “He has rented a big house just outside Cocoa. That’s really close to Cape Canaveral.”

“You’ve checked the premises?”

“Carefully.”

“Just what am I to do?” Kent asked. He had a very good idea what he was to do, but he wanted the colonel to spell it out.

“You will take one man and go down there. Use your head. Don’t do the obvious, and remember, you’ll probably be up against a very clever man and a ruthless one.” The colonel pushed his chair back from the desk.

“I get to pick my man?” Kent asked.

“Yes. If you get into trouble you can have all the help you need.”

“Thanks,” Kent said dryly. On this sort of mission help generally came too late. The bind usually came at a place where

there were no telephones. "I'll take Captain Spud Murphy with me."

The colonel frowned. "Captain Murphy is hotheaded. He always looks for trouble."

"He's a good man to have along when the knives start coming your way or some goons start an alley rumpus." Kent got to his feet.

"Report in every day." Colonel Jefferys rose.

"If facilities are available."

"You're going to Florida, not to a desert island," Jefferys said dryly.

"We're starting in Florida," Kent answered.

Colonel Jefferys extended his hand. They shook. "Good hunting," the colonel said.

"Thank you, sir." Kent turned and walked out of the office.

As he moved down the long hallway in the Pentagon, he set a fast pace. He was glad he wasn't assigned here. The job ahead would probably turn out to be routine, but even a shoe-leather job was better than sitting behind a desk. And the job might turn out to be a rugged assignment. He'd call Spud and get everything set for departure South the next day.

CHAPTER 2

The House at Palm Lane

THE house on Palm Lane, Cocoa, Florida, stood close to the west bank of the Indian River. It was a big, rambling house with seven bedrooms, a large living room, and a spacious kitchen. Mrs. Pike, the housekeeper, took her duties seriously. She grumbled over the amount of dusting and sweeping she had to do, but she could not complain about her employer's habits. Mr. Galt was a neat man, and he never used any part of the house except his bedroom and the breakfast room off the kitchen. Mrs. Pike was a sharp-eyed woman, with a tongue as sharp as her eyes. She attended church twice on Sunday and went to prayer meeting every Wednesday evening. Mr. Galt knew all of these qualities before he hired her. Mrs. Pike fitted into his plans very well.

Back of the house on the riverbank there was a boat landing where Galt kept a fast little boat powered by an outboard motor. The master of the house spent a good deal of his time on the river fishing. Oddly enough Mrs. Pike was never asked

to serve fish. Mr. Galt never caught any fish. The river teemed with them, but as he never baited a hook he did not have to bother with fish.

The morning Kent Barstow and Spud Murphy started their drive from Washington to Florida, Galt told Mrs. Pike he was going fishing and would probably be late for his evening meal. After he left the kitchen, Mrs. Pike snorted to herself. Mr. Galt was only a little more than middle-aged. He was sound of body. In her opinion it was a sin to sit out on the river all afternoon accomplishing nothing, not even catching a fish. Even a rich man should be doing something useful.

Galt was in as close to a happy mood as he ever allowed himself. For weeks he was aware that his every movement had been watched. He had been followed when he went to town, and more than one field glass had been on him while he was out on the river. His house had been searched. Mrs. Pike had been questioned. Galt's thin lips parted in a half-smile as he untied his boat and stepped into it. The shadowing was over, he was sure of that. He was an expert at shadowing and knew all of the tricks.

The outboard roared to life when he jerked the starter. Galt backed the boat away from the platform and swung it around. He headed out into the river. A jug bobbed on the surface ahead of him. Galt cut the engine and drifted alongside the jug. He lifted it from the water, lowering it below the side of the boat. This was from force of habit. No powerful binoculars watched him today. He removed the cork from the jug. A tube was attached to the cork. Galt pulled a rolled sheet of thin paper from the tube and sat reading the message written on it. He grunted as he crumpled the paper and lit a match to burn it. Replacing the cork, he started pulling in the heavy line at-

tached to the handle of the jug. From the shore it would appear that a fisherman was pulling in his set line hoping to find a catfish on one of the hooks. The end of the line showed three large bare hooks.

"Got the bait again," Galt said aloud. But he did not laugh at his own joke. He lowered the hooks into the boat and bent over them as though replacing stolen bait, then he tossed the line overboard. Taking a pad from his pocket, he wrote a brief message on it. After inserting the message into the tube he corked the jug and dropped it over the side.

Galt made a leisurely trip upstream. He constantly watched the shore as the boat chugged along. Highway 1 ran along parallel to the river. He felt certain no one was interested in him, but he was always watchful, like a wild animal hunting, or a wild beast that was hunted. Mostly he had done the hunting, but once the authorities tied him in with certain agents they were after he would most certainly be hunted.

Leaving the middle of the river, Galt headed toward the west shore where palmetto and trees formed a dense jungle-like growth. Reaching the shore, he beached the boat. Four quick strides took him to a path through the bush. The path would have gone unobserved by any person but someone who knew it was there. Galt hurried along, brushing aside branches with impatient thrusts of his hands. He was a short man, built spare but sinewy. His face was thin and his nose hooked like a beak. The one arresting quality about him was his eyes. They stared out on the world with a cold intent that never wavered.

The path ended in a small clearing. There was a small, one-room house at the far edge of the clearing. It had a sagging porch attached to it. Fishpoles stood propped against the porch

rail, and several pairs of hip-length rubber boots lay on the porch floor along with a battered black felt hat.

Galt paused before the closed door of the house. He knocked rapidly three times. The door was opened by a shapely blonde whose eyebrows had been extended and darkened and whose lips carried a great deal too much lipstick. When she saw Galt she backed away, leaving the door open. Galt stepped inside and kicked the door shut. He faced the girl, his hard eyes studying her disapprovingly.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"Metz and Bernie will be along in ten minutes." The girl crossed the room and sat down in the only upholstered chair.

Galt walked to a table and seated himself on one of the kitchen chairs close to it. The girl lighted a cigarette. Galt studied her for a time before speaking again.

"When you get back to town, clean off that make-up." His voice was harsh. "The men I want you to work on don't go for floozies."

The girl tossed her head. It was a defiant gesture, but she said, "Sure, boss, I'll be the innocent country gal."

Galt grunted, then turned his head sidewise. The sound of boots on the porch heralded visitors. The door opened and a tall man entered, followed by a swarthy bull-necked man. The tall man grinned at the girl.

"Hi, Goldie," he greeted her.

"Hi, Bernie," she answered. She ignored the swarthy man.

"Sit down," Galt ordered.

The two men seated themselves. Both were dressed in summer business suits of good cut, but Bernie's hung on him in drapes and folds.

"You better learn to be on time." Galt's eyes lifted from his wrist watch.

"Metz drove," Bernie said. "You know how he is."

Goldie did not move to join the men. Galt gave his attention to Bernie and Metz. "The big brass at the Pentagon are putting two men on the job down here. Colonel Jefferys thinks he knows what we're up to."

"What good will that do him?" Bernie asked.

"The man they're putting on the job could give us trouble." Galt's mouth pulled into a thin line. "He outwitted us once before."

"What you want done to him?" Metz asked. His voice was hoarse, hardly above a whisper. He had suffered serious injury in a fight with a man who knew judo.

"He has a major with him. I have decided to eliminate both of them. This Kent Barstow won't be looking for the things Intelligence looked for. He'll be thinking along lines far different. It is best not to let him have a chance to uncover anything."

"You can spot them for us?" Bernie asked.

"Goldie will put the finger on them." Galt glanced toward the girl. "I'll brief her after you leave."

Bernie grinned at Goldie. "We got a date, babe," he said.

Goldie smiled back at him. Metz scowled. He did not like working with a woman. He considered women untrustworthy.

"You take a walk," Galt said to the girl.

Goldie got to her feet and sauntered across the room. She stepped outside and closed the door. Galt half turned and spoke in a loud voice. "Go on, get off the porch!"

The clicking of high heels indicated Goldie was obeying the command. Galt turned back to the men. He spoke rapidly,

pausing at intervals to make either Bernie or Metz repeat what he had said.

When Goldie returned the men were smoking. Galt and Bernie smoked cigarettes, Metz puffed on a cheap black cigar. Goldie stood at the open door looking into the room.

"Come in," Galt said. "Bernie and Metz are leaving. I'll tell you what you are to do."

Goldie walked across to the easy chair and seated herself. She took out her cigarettes and lighted one. Bernie and Metz got to their feet.

"I'm driving back to town," Bernie said.

Metz shrugged his shoulders but said nothing. The two men left, and Galt gave his attention to the girl.

CHAPTER 3

The Girl in the Convertible

KENT BARSTOW and Spud Murphy were heading out of Savannah, Georgia. Spud was driving. He sat hunched forward, his eyes on the road that stretched straight ahead. Cars irritated Spud. He preferred a jet plane. When he drove, he kept his foot jammed down on the gas feed. The speedometer needle began nudging ninety miles per hour. They flashed past a sign that read "SPEED CONTROLLED BY RADAR, LIMIT FORTY-FIVE MPH." Spud spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"How come they pick on us for a gumshoe job?"

"I didn't ask Jefferys," Kent answered.

"We're supposed to be jet jockeys. All we'll do on this detail is to snoop and walk." The car went screaming into a turn, swaying close to the edge of the pavement and almost hitting a curve sign. Spud eased up on the gas disgustedly. He looked over at Kent. "Want to push this thing awhile?"

Kent nodded, keeping the relief from showing. The car

was his and he didn't want it wrecked; more important, he didn't want to get his neck broken.

Spud slowed the car and stopped. Kent got out and walked around to the driver's side. Spud slumped down in the seat. The car moved off at an easy pace.

"You can always quit," Kent said. "Catch a stand-by flight back to the Pentagon."

Spud snorted. "And get myself slapped down back of a desk. Even gumshoeing is better than that."

They drove on in silence. Kent was thinking about the meager leads he had been given by Jefferys. Jefferys had a hunch about a man named Galt. Probably Jefferys was just irritated because his operatives hadn't been able to pin anything on Galt. Almost at once Kent tossed that idea aside. Jefferys forgot a man once he was convinced that man was clean.

They crossed the state line into Florida. They detoured around Jacksonville and were on the last leg of the journey. Spud was asleep and snoring. Kent kept his speed to the legal limit.

Cocoa mileage began to show up on the road signs. Kent studied the countryside carefully. Conceivably somewhere in this citrus-growing country a transmitter could be operating, sending and receiving messages. Those messages would be camouflaged so that they would appear to be the harmless talk of a ham operator. Kent frowned. Jefferys' men would have checked every licensed ham. But the foreign operatives might have bought an established ham. They would be able to offer an amount that might tempt certain men.

Motels began to appear along the road. Idly Kent checked the VACANCY, NO VACANCY signs. He picked a modest motel

inside the city limits and turned off the highway. Stopping the car before the office, he grinned over at Spud, who was still asleep. He nudged Spud in the ribs with a thumb. Spud jerked upright and opened his eyes. He blinked at Kent.

“Don’t do things like that,” he growled. “I was having a bad dream. Thug had a gun in my ribs.”

“This place look all right?” Kent asked.

“Suits me.”

They both got out of the car and entered the office. A girl with a pony tail fastened by a red bar pin sat behind a counter. She smiled brightly at the boys. Spud grinned back.

“Got a double, sister?” Spud asked. He was always ready to take the lead when they were dealing with a girl.

“Sure, mister,” the girl answered. She shoved a pad toward Spud. “Register.” She gave Spud a saucy look. “Put down your real name and address. That’s the law.”

Spud took the pen she offered and wrote their names. Kent supplied his car’s license number. He frowned down at the pad. Signing their real names might not be so smart. But it was done. Spud was already walking toward the door with the girl.

“What’s your name?” Spud asked.

“Patricia Diana Semple,” the girl answered.

“Pat, eh?”

“Sure, if you want it that way.”

Kent walked to the car to get his bag. Spud waited beside the girl, hoping that Kent would take out both bags. When Kent got out only his own, Spud walked to the car and got his bag.

Their room was clean and comfortably furnished with chairs,

a dresser, a desk with a phone on it, and a deep-mattressed bed. The girl stood at the door looking in.

"You want anything, just ring the office," she said, and backed away.

"I saw two cafés back a couple of blocks," Kent said. "Which is the best?"

"The Cocoa Tavern has the best jukebox numbers. Real hot." The girl smiled at Spud.

"How about the food?" Kent persisted.

"Well, the Coffee Nook has home cooking."

"That's for me," Kent said.

"Now wait a minute." Spud gave his attention to the girl. "You dance at the Cocoa Tavern any?"

"Sure. Most every night." The girl turned and walked toward the office.

"This is a business trip," Kent reminded Spud.

Spud glanced at his wrist watch. "It's twenty-eight past six. You going to start sleuthing tonight?"

"I'm going to eat some home cooking, then I'm driving past a house on Palm Lane. I'd like to get a look at a man named Galt." Kent turned to the dresser and examined his chin for stubble.

"You won't need me for a simple task like that," Spud answered.

"No, you keep your rendezvous at the Cocoa Tavern."

They washed up and left the cottage. They reached the Cocoa Tavern first. Kent kept on going toward a neon sign that read "Coffee Nook." Spud hesitated, then followed Kent.

The home cooking offered by the small café proved to be excellent. Spud, always a hearty eater, enjoyed the meal of

Southern fried chicken so much that he did not miss the juke-box. The boys did not hurry their meal. They drank their extra cups of coffee slowly.

A car pulled in at the Shady Corner Motel and a tall, thin man got out. Bernie had been checking motels all day. This would be his last check for the evening. The work was slow because he did not want his quarry to know anyone had asked for them. He sauntered to the office and looked in through the open door. Patricia Semple sat back of the counter. She was bored and showed it. The man looking in did not interest her. He was past forty and had a homely face with close-set, small eyes.

Bernie entered. He propped an elbow on the counter. "Owner around?" he asked.

"He's out back," the girl answered.

"Want to see him about an order he placed with us." Bernie took a card from his pocket and dropped it before the girl.

She looked at the card then at Bernie. "I'll go tell him," she said. "He's supposed to take over at night." She stepped around the counter and walked toward a back door.

The instant the girl was out of the room Bernie reached over and scooped up a number of registration cards from a tray. The top card held the information he was seeking. He dropped the cards back into the tray and stepped over to a window.

Patricia's father entered. He looked at Bernie and then at the card he held in his hand. "I never ordered anything from the Florida Motel Supply," he said.

"You sure?" Bernie asked in apparent surprise.

"I'm sure."

"Must be an office mistake. My book says we sold you an order of linen, sheets and such." Bernie pulled a small order book from his pocket and squinted at an open page. "Says here, Shady Corner Motel."

"Well, just don't try to deliver any sheets here," Semple snapped.

"Don't worry," Bernie answered pleasantly. "Mistakes can happen." He turned toward the door. "Perhaps we can do business later." He sauntered out and got into his car.

"You could have told him that order was a mistake," Semple said peevishly. "I wasn't through watering the back lawn."

"I want to get off early. Me and some of the girls are dancing at the Tavern tonight." Pat smiled at her father.

"I'll take over." His manner softened. He glanced into the card tray. "See you rented Number Seven."

"Two men from Washington," Pat answered. She did not want her father to know the men were young and good-looking and that she hoped to meet one of them at the Cocoa Tavern.

Bernie drove away from the motel. He parked his car ahead of a blue Lincoln, got out, and walked back. When he was near the motel he left the sidewalk and walked around back of the hedge that lined the motel driveway. The hedge was only breast high but it was dense. Bernie sat down and started to part the leaves and branches so that he could see through.

Kent and Spud came out of the café. The air was pleasantly cool. Dusk was settling over the town. They walked slowly back to the motel.

"Be real dark in a half-hour," Spud said. "Not much use

casing that house tonight." He was thinking about the Cocoa Tavern and Pat Semple.

"Best time to do it." Kent turned off the path leading toward the office and headed toward his car. When they reached the car he turned to Spud. "You don't have to go. This is just a quick look."

Spud brightened at once. "In that case I'll just have a look around here."

"Don't miss the Cocoa Tavern," Kent said with a grin.

"Best place to hear stuff, a tavern," Spud answered.

Kent got into his car and drove off. Spud walked out to the street and headed toward the lights of the Cocoa Tavern.

The moment Spud was gone Bernie got to his feet and hurried to his car. He got in and drove away. He did not go far before stopping before a sidewalk telephone booth. He hurried to the booth and put through two calls.

Kent inquired at a filling station and got directions to Palm Lane. He drove out of town and found himself on a tree-bordered lane. He had no trouble in locating Galt's house. There was a light over the house number. The house looked like any old colonial mansion. He could see light coming from a downstairs window. Kent drove on past and parked in deep shadows two doors down from the house. He switched off his lights and sat thinking for a few minutes.

Finally Kent decided to walk back to the house and watch it for a while. He did not know what he could accomplish by this, but Galt might have visitors. He was hoping that Galt might have relaxed his vigilance if he had been aware that he was being watched and checked. Jefferys said that no operatives had been working on Galt for some time. Galt might turn out to be what he was supposed to be, just a retired wealthy

man. If he was anything else, Kent might get an inkling of what he was up to.

There was much shrubbery in the yard. Kent was able to approach the house under cover. He stood behind a big hydrangea bush and peered at the lighted window. The shade was up and a lace curtain was stirring in the breeze. Kent moved to another bush close to the window. He could now look into the room.

A short, small-proportioned man sat at a desk. He was writing what appeared to be a letter. There was a big bed in the room and several easy chairs. If this man was Galt, he looked very much like a retired businessman. He had his coat off, revealing suspenders crossed over a white shirt. The man stopped writing. He folded the sheet he had written on and put it into an envelope, then addressed the envelope. He searched for a stamp in a drawer and found one. After he had licked the stamp and fastened it to the envelope, he got to his feet and crossed the room, passing out of Kent's view. He returned with a bottle and a glass. After pouring a drink, he sat down.

Kent studied the man. Now that he could see him full face he began to have a feeling that Jefferys might be right. If this man was a businessman, he had been a ruthless one. The mouth and the eyes had a hard look.

The man finished his drink and started getting ready for bed. Kent stayed until the light went out before returning to his car.

Back in the Cocoa Tavern Spud was patting himself on the back. He had gotten a real break. Pat was there with two other girls and she had given him a quick smile. He was about to

ask her to dance with him when a very attractive blonde entered the tavern. She looked out of place in a café where no liquor was served and where teen agers gathered. Spud decided she was at least twenty-one years of age. Her hair was done in a smart style and she wore simple clothes. Her face appeared to have no make-up or only a very little. She sat down at a table and ordered a coke.

Spud forgot about Pat. Pat sensed a rival and her chin thrust out. She moved close to Spud as she walked to a counter and ordered a drink. But Spud didn't look at her. His eyes were on the blonde. She looked up and caught him staring at her. For a moment she dropped her eyes, then lifted them and returned Spud's smile. That did it. Spud picked up his drink and walked to her table.

"May I join you?" he asked very politely.

"Yes." She appeared a bit confused.

A country girl, Spud thought. Not very sure of herself. He sat down and sipped his drink. "You come here often?" he asked.

"I come once in a while," she answered.

"I'm Spud Murphy. And you?"

"You can call me Goldie." She bit her lip as though she knew she had done something very forward.

"My lucky night," Spud said gallantly. "Dropping in here the night you picked to stop by."

"I get lonesome," Goldie said.

"You should have scads of friends," Spud said.

"I came down alone and haven't met many people."

"From up North?"

"Ohio."

Spud smiled broadly. He had been right, she was a country girl. Goldie stirred. She smiled shyly at Spud.

"It's stuffy in here. I have a car. Why don't we go for a ride?"

For a moment Spud was taken aback. The blonde wasn't quite so shy as she had appeared. Then he pushed the thought aside.

"Why not?" He got to his feet.

When they stepped out of the tavern Spud's eyes opened wide. Goldie walked straight to a long, low convertible with the top down. The car was pink with a white trim. Before Spud could open the door Goldie had it open. She slid over under the wheel. Spud got in.

"Some car you have," he said.

"I like it. It's fast." Goldie started the motor and shot away from the curb. Spud leaned back and grinned. He was sure going to like this girl.

Kent parked beside Cabin Seven. He got out and let himself in. Switching on the light, he pulled off his coat and tie. He wasn't in the mood to go looking for jukebox music and dancing. He kept thinking about the face of the man he had watched in the bedroom.

Kent had no intention of staying up to wait for Spud. He lounged for a while, then undressed and got into bed. The long drive had been tiring, and he dropped off to sleep at once.

Kent woke early, from habit. His training as a pilot and his service afterward had always gotten him up early. At first he did not notice that Spud wasn't in bed with him. He sat up and looked at the pillow Spud should have used. It was smooth, showing not a single wrinkle. Kent got out of bed. He exam-

ined the clothing in the closet. When he turned away, he was certain Spud had not come back to the motel.

His first reaction was irritation. Spud knew better than to go off skylarking when they were on a job. Then he started to worry. He dressed hurriedly and headed for the office.

CHAPTER 4

Sidetracked

KENT wanted to talk to Patricia Semple. Spud had expected to meet the girl at the Cocoa Tavern. He entered the office, but there was no one present. He crossed to the counter and tapped a bell several times. After some delay Semple appeared.

“Yes?” he asked gruffly.

“I’d like to talk to the girl who was at the desk yesterday when my friend and I checked in,” Kent said.

Semple gave him a sharp look. “Pat’s eating breakfast. What you want to know?”

“I just want to ask her a few questions,” Kent persisted.

“I’ll send her in.” Semple left the office.

In a few minutes Pat appeared. She smiled at Kent. Kent glanced toward the back door. It was open an inch or so. He was sure Semple was there listening.

“You went to the Cocoa Tavern last night?” Kent asked.

“Yes.” Pat’s smile vanished.

"Did you see my friend there?"

"I saw him." Pat tossed her head and stared at Kent.

"How long did he stay?"

"He left with a blonde," Pat said. "A pretty tough blonde."

Kent smiled. It was clear that Pat felt the blonde had beaten her time with Spud. "How do you mean tough?"

"She didn't fool me," Pat said. "She was playing like she was a poor lonesome thing, but she's tough."

"You know her?"

"Never saw her before." Pat leaned back against the counter. "They went off in a big pink-and-white convertible."

Kent was willing to accept Pat's analysis of the blonde. He had a healthy respect for one woman's ability to size up another woman. Pat was only a girl, but she probably had a woman's intuition. He changed his line of questioning.

"Did any other guests check in after we did?"

"No."

"Have any visitors?"

"Only a salesman, but he had made a mistake." Pat eyed Kent closely.

"Did your father talk to him?"

"I went out back and got Dad." Pat smiled. "You a detective?"

"I'm not a detective," Kent answered. He wanted to end the session. He had found out what he wanted to know. Some smart operator had checked up on him and Spud. Things were moving faster than he had expected. He turned toward the door, paused there, and smiled back at Pat.

"Thanks, Pat," he said.

"Your pal ran away with that blonde?" Pat asked.

"No, I don't think he ran away with her." Kent stepped outside.

As he walked toward his car he considered a course of action. He had only one tangible thing to go on. Spud had taken a ride with a blonde who drove a pink convertible. He didn't think he was likely to find that convertible, but he had to find Spud. He dreaded the call he had to make to Jefferys. He decided to get it over with before he had breakfast. He remembered seeing a sidewalk phone booth down the street.

Getting into his car, he drove along the street until he came to the booth. An exploration of his pockets revealed enough silver for a call. He entered the booth and asked the operator to get him Jefferys' private number. It was early, but he knew the colonel would be at his desk.

Jefferys answered the call quickly. Kent briefly outlined what had happened. Jefferys' reaction was typical of him.

"Well, you've stirred up something and done it fast. You keep after Galt."

"What about Spud?"

"I'll detail a couple of men to find Murphy. This may be a trick to get you sidetracked," Colonel Jefferys said crisply.

Kent scowled. Men were expendable in the colonel's book. This was a war to him, a hot war and not a cold one.

"But Spud's disappearance ties right in with what I'm looking for," Kent said impatiently.

"Possibly, possibly not. You go after Galt."

"The guy looks clean," Kent protested.

"Stay on Galt," the colonel snapped.

"Yes, sir," Kent said, and dropped the receiver into place.

Kent got into his car and headed for Palm Lane. He kept watching for a pink convertible, but he did not expect to spot

one with a blonde driver, nor did he have much hope of learning anything by visiting the colonial mansion. He was in a rebellious mood; he couldn't get Spud out of his mind. He knew from experience that the foreign operatives working under cover in this country were a ruthless lot.

He checked the place where Galt lived as he drove by. The house looked deserted, but he could see a car in the garage. The doors were open and the car had not been driven entirely inside the building. It was an ordinary upper-bracket car and it needed washing and polishing. Kent parked well down the street ahead of a pickup truck. He sat for a time studying the big house. It would not be wise to try to approach the place by day. The scattered shrubbery in the yard offered protection at night but would not afford cover in daylight.

An hour passed, and the only person he saw near the house was a woman who came out of the back door and walked down the street toward him. She did not look like an undercover agent. Kent properly placed her as Galt's housekeeper. She was a prim-looking woman well past middle age. She had very likely been questioned by Jefferys' men. She passed Kent's car without glancing at it. She was hurrying to get home to a bit of housecleaning she had put off. She was lucky this morning because Mr. Galt had told her to take the rest of the day off.

The sun was beating down on the top of the car, and the heat inside was mounting. Kent squirmed. He wasn't getting any place sitting in the car sweating. He began thinking about disregarding Jefferys' orders and returning to town. He might be able to pick up Spud's trail.

A car appeared far down the road. Kent sank down in his seat but he kept his head high enough so that he could watch

the car. It moved fast, and when it reached Galt's driveway it turned in. Kent removed his hat and settled deeper, sliding down until his knees pushed against the dash. The car stopped and a tall man got out. He walked to the front door and pushed the bell. He stood there with his shoulders hunched, waiting for the door to open. He acted impatient, jabbing the bell button, then stepping back, then jabbing again. Finally the door opened and he went inside.

Kent started the engine and moved away from the curb. He turned around and drove past the house. The car parked in the driveway carried Florida plates. Kent made a note of the number after he had turned off on a side street and parked where a hedge would screen his car from anyone passing in the lane. He got out of the car and walked to the hedge. By looking over the bushes he could see the yard of the big house.

Inside the house Galt had led Bernie to the kitchen. He did not speak until they were seated. He fixed his cold eyes on Bernie and said, "Well?"

"Up to a point it went off like you ordered," Bernie said uneasily.

"Then what happened?"

"That captain is a husky man. He worked his hands loose and yanked off the blindfold before Metz could sap him." Bernie rubbed his jaw with a finger. "He slugged me and I went down."

"He saw you and Metz?"

"Yeah, he saw us both."

"That means he'll have to be permanently eliminated," Galt said grimly. "Both of you are well established here as citrus buyers. We haven't time to work anyone else in."

"I've never come here before. Could be risky, my driving out here," Bernie said uneasily.

"It had to be done. You know we can't risk a phone call, and the river method takes too long," Galt snapped.

"The river method is one hundred per cent safe," Bernie said stubbornly.

"I'm convinced that we have just one man to contend with, Kent Barstow. Right now he'll be combing the town looking for his partner."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Trap him and we'll be rid of both of them."

"Got any ideas?"

"Use Goldie as bait again."

"What if he's gone to the police and they pick Goldie up?" Bernie asked.

"I doubt if he has gone to the police. He won't want any publicity. But what if they do pick her up? What can they prove?" Galt rapped on the table with his knuckles and stared hard at Bernie.

"Be kind of tough. He may not give her a nice chance like the captain did."

"He already has her description and probably a description of her car. He's a smart man. There were girls in that tavern, you said. He'd question them." Galt got to his feet. "I want action today."

"I'll get on it." Bernie stood up. "When do we knife the one we got?"

"Tonight. You'll need a dark river when you drop him overboard," Galt answered.

"He won't be any problem, not with the setup we got,"

Bernie said with a grin. He moved out of the kitchen toward the front door. Galt went as far as the door with him.

“No more errors,” Galt said harshly. “You’re both lucky that I can’t replace you.”

CHAPTER 5

Dead End

KENT hurried back to his car when he saw Bernie leave the house. He did not try to follow until Bernie had driven past the intersection. When he turned into Palm Lane, the car he planned to follow was far ahead and traveling at a fast pace. Kent trailed along not trying to catch up. Tailing a trained operator in the middle of the day would not be easy. But then the man ahead might just be a businessman or a friend of Galt's.

The car ahead left Palm Lane and entered heavy traffic on the main thoroughfare. Kent speeded up, cutting in and out to close the gap. He kept an eye open for police cars. He was doing something the law frowned upon.

Now he felt he was close enough and dropped in behind a truck. He kept over enough so that he could see the car he was following. It suddenly made a right turn and at the same moment the truck slowed for a pedestrian crossing which the car had ignored. Kent slammed on his brakes. The truck

started moving again, but when Kent reached the cross street the car he was trailing was not in sight. He made a right turn and drove down the side street. His quarry had evidently made another turn. Kent could only guess which way it had gone. The driver had a number of choices, left or right, and then a choice of direction at the cross streets.

Kent drove slowly back to the boulevard. He felt certain the man he had followed had not been just an ordinary person paying Galt a visit. He had acted as though he were shaking a shadow or just making sure that no one followed him. Kent stopped at the café where he had eaten the first night. While at lunch he would decide what his next move would be.

After lunch Kent checked with the local police chief and learned that the man he had followed was Bernie Grout. He checked out the address and found it to be a citrus-packing shed where oranges and grapefruit and lemons were packed for shipment. The lone workman on duty informed him that neither Bernie Grout nor his partner, Metz Kapp, was on the premises. It seemed they did not spend much time there, though they did ship fruit North every day. Kent made it a point to enter the shed for a look at the place. It was a one-room building, and there were no indications that either Grout or Kapp lived there.

Before turning away he asked the attendant, "Do you have Mr. Grout's home address?"

"He stays at the Palmetto Hotel," the man answered.

"How long have Grout and Kapp been running this business?" Kent asked.

"I been working for them a year." The man hesitated, then asked, "You a collector? Have they got money trouble?"

"No, I'm down here picking up fruit for a Northern firm," Kent answered.

The man shook his head. "If they'd stay here and tend to business they'd sell a lot more fruit."

Kent thanked the man and left. He drove through the packing and processing district. Cocoa was the largest shipper of private-order packages of fruit in Florida. There were many firms doing this mail-order business, some smaller and some larger than the operation carried on by Grout and Kapp. Kent decided the business could be a good cover. Packages could be shipped to addresses scattered over the country. The receivers would be hard to check.

The Palmetto Hotel seemed to be the next stop. Kent returned to the main boulevard, checked a city map for the address, and drove to the hotel. He parked his car and walked across the parking lot to the hotel. The car he had followed was not in the lot.

At the desk he was told that Bernie Grout was not in. Metz Kapp was also registered at the hotel, but he wasn't in.

"Will they be apt to return before dinner?" Kent asked.

"I can't say," the clerk answered. "They come and go. They have been staying here a long time. I pay no attention to them and they require little desk service."

A feeling of frustration was building up inside Kent. If it wasn't for the fact that Spud was missing he would be ready to call Jefferys and tell him this was a very cold trail. He walked to his car and got in. More than half of the afternoon was gone and he had accomplished nothing. He supposed Jefferys' operators were on the job looking for Spud. He could contact the local police and find out if they had been called in.

This would touch off a rumble from Jefferys. Kent was supposed to be checking Galt.

There was one thing he could do while waiting to catch up with Grout, he could check filling stations in the hope of getting the identity of the blonde who drove the pink convertible. He started on those nearest the Palmetto Hotel. None of them had serviced a pink convertible Oldsmobile. All of them smilingly admitted that they served many blondes every day. He kept on checking. In the motel section he found a station that had serviced a pink Olds a number of times, but the driver was a man.

Dinnertime was approaching, and Kent decided to return to his motel. He parked, and before he went to his cottage he stopped at the office. Pat was back of the counter looking bored. She brightened up as Kent approached. Kent smiled at her.

"Business slow?" he asked.

"Awful."

"Could you describe that salesman who got the wrong address yesterday?"

"Sure." Pat caught her lower lip with her teeth thoughtfully. Then she started describing Bernie. Before she had finished Kent was sure he was the man he had followed. "His suit just hung on him real sloppy."

"Gray, tropical outfit?"

Pat nodded. "And he wore one of those funny ties, just two cords with a horse's head fastener."

"Thanks, Pat," Kent said.

"Your pal show up?"

"No," Kent answered.

"That tough blonde just ran away with him?"

"I guess so." Kent turned away from the counter and left the office.

After a shower and a change of shirts Kent got into his car and headed toward the small café. He had gone only half a block when a pink Olds convertible slipped past him. A trim blonde sat back of the wheel. She did not seem to notice Kent's car. She was driving fast, heading out of town. Kent forgot about dinner. He concentrated upon overtaking the blonde. He was gaining on her car as she left the city limits, but there she speeded up. Kent knew that in a race he could not hope to catch the Olds, but he might be able to find out where she was going. He stepped on the gas and gave chase.

The blonde turned off the boulevard and drove along a side street toward the river. She made several turns, taking them at high speed, and finally stopped well back in a driveway beside a cottage. There was a double garage in the back but she did not drive up to it. She sat in the car lighting a cigarette. Kent had pulled to the curb outside the drive. If she knew he had followed her, she did not show any signs of such knowledge. After the cigarette was going, she started running a comb through her wind-ruffled hair.

Evening shadows had settled but there was still light. Kent had not turned on his lights. A warning bell had sounded in Kent's head. If this blonde had lured Spud into an ambush, she might be trying the same trick on him. He leaned forward, and the hard substance of his service revolver in its shoulder holster was reassuring. He decided that a bit of scouting was called for.

Starting the car, he backed along the curb, and when he was well away from the driveway, he made a U-turn and drove back along the street. There were no cross streets on the left

because the river ran close to the street. There were no other cottages close to the one where the blonde had parked, but there was a road turning left toward the riverbank. It was no more than a trail, but Kent turned across the street toward it. He kept close watch on the driveway back at the cottage. He saw no sign of the girl. He was sure he could spot her because she was wearing a bright red blouse. He kept driving until he reached a spot where he could turn off the trail into a grove of trees. He parked the car and got a small flashlight from the glove compartment. He tucked the flashlight into his pocket and started through the trees toward the cottage, keeping close to the riverbank. He stopped to listen just before losing sight of his car. He stood for a full five minutes watching the car.

Back at the cottage, Blondie got out of the car and hurried inside through a side door. The room she entered was lighted, but heavy drapes kept this fact from anyone passing on the street. Bernie and Metz sat at a table playing cards. They laid down their hands when she entered.

“You muffed it?” Bernie asked sourly.

“He followed me here, then spooked and took off,” Goldie answered.

Bernie got to his feet fast. Metz pushed his chair back and stared at Goldie.

“That means he’s going for help,” Bernie snapped. “We’ll have to load our man and head for the river.”

Metz stood up. “About time,” he growled.

Goldie and the two men hurried out of the room through a kitchen and a door that opened into the garage. Bernie switched on a light. Spud sat on the concrete floor with his back against the wall. His mouth was taped shut, and his wrists and ankles were bound. He stared at the three, and his eyes blazed. He

was groggy from lack of food and water but he was still defiant. Metz pulled a leather-covered sap from his hip pocket and moved to where Spud sat. When he lifted his hand to strike, Spud jerked his head aside. The blow landed at the base of Spud's skull. He swayed for a moment, then rolled over on his side and lay still.

Bernie and Metz caught hold of Spud's legs and dragged him toward a back door. Goldie moved ahead and opened the door. The garage had a landing platform at the back that jutted out over the river. Three boats with outboard motors were tied up to the landing. The men rolled Spud's bulky form into the largest of the boats. Metz turned back to the garage and entered. He reappeared, dragging several heavy iron bars fastened together with wire. The load was all that he could manage. At the edge of the landing Bernie helped him dump the bars into the boat beside Bernie's body.

"That boat won't carry both of us," Bernie said. "You can handle this alone."

Metz glared at Bernie. "It ain't quite dark yet, so you figure you might be seen out there dumping him."

"I just don't want to swamp the boat," Bernie argued.

"You better go along, Bernie." Goldie had stepped forward and was peering down into the boat.

"I didn't like this business of using you a second time," Bernie said. He, too, was looking down into the boat.

Metz stepped close to Bernie. "Get in," he snarled, and gave Bernie a shove.

Bernie whirled to face Metz and his hand slid menacingly inside his coat. Goldie stepped between them.

"Lay off," she snapped.

Bernie turned and lowered himself into the boat. He stepped

over the prostrate body and seated himself well forward. Metz got in and unfastened the mooring line.

When no one approached his car, Kent turned and moved through the trees. He hurried along, dodging around bushes and trees, keeping close to the river as a guide.

He was still in a tangle of trees and brush when he heard an outboard motor start drumming. The sound came from the spot where he had figured the cottage stood. He plunged forward, shoving aside vines and bushes. He had gone less than a hundred yards when he saw the outline of the garage through the trees. The motorboat was out on the river now. Kent slowed a little as he neared a spot where the woods ended. Looking out at the back of the garage, he saw the landing with two boats tied up, and he saw the red blouse of the blonde. She was standing on the platform with her back to him. He could not see her very clearly because of the fast-dimming light.

The picture that Kent got made him move fast. Two men were making off in a boat. Did they have Spud with them? If they had, he must be lying on the bottom of the boat. The implication sent a chill through Kent. He came to the end of the landing, paused long enough to kick off his shoes, then moved down upon the girl who was watching the dark shape of the boat on the river. Kent's arm encircled her and one hand closed her mouth. She struggled like a cornered cat, but he was able to hold her and to get out his handkerchief to use as a gag. He did not have time to look for ropes to tie her up, but he had to silence her. She bit and twisted, but he knotted the gag between her teeth. Then he shoved her to the edge of the platform and lowered her into the boat. He was beside her at once,

unfastening the mooring line with one hand while the other arm kept her from attacking him.

Kent held the girl and fumbled for the controls on the outboard engine. He found them but he had to loosen his grip on the girl to start the motor. The instant she was loose she leaped back. The motor burst into a roar and the boat backed away from the landing. The sudden thrust dropped the girl to her knees. Kent swung the boat around and opened the throttle wide. The girl pulled herself to a crouching position, her hands on the side of the boat. Then she leaped into the water. The boat knifed past her as she came up. Kent did not look back. It did not matter now if she did scream a warning to the men in the other boat. His motor had already warned them.

The two men in the boat out on the river had cut their motor and were standing up. They turned and remained looking toward the outboard that was roaring toward them. Kent could see that they had a bulky form between them. They bent forward and heaved the form over the side. An instant later their motor started and the boat raced away upriver. Kent headed for the spot where the bulky object had been tossed overboard. As he neared the spot he saw bubbles coming to the surface. He looked for an anchor and found it close to the tiller. He heaved it overboard, then stood up and dived.

The river was not deep at the point where Spud had been dumped. Kent went down, his hands reaching. They found legs and then wire attached to something. Frantically Kent twisted at the wire. He had just this one dive. There would be no time for a second. If this was Spud, and he was alive, he had to be gotten out at once. The wire gave, then caught in a snarl. Kent jerked and twisted. His lungs seemed aflame. Then the wire

jerked free. Kent gripped the back of the victim's jacket and started up.

Breaking water near the boat, Kent towed his burden to it. He climbed in and pulled the man over the side. When he bent over him, he saw that he had found Spud. Rolling him over, he started working over him, getting water out of his lungs and air into them. Spud gave no signs of being alive. Kent got him on his back. He slashed the ropes binding wrists and ankles with his pocketknife, then he started artificial respiration. Spud still gave no sign of life. Grimly, Kent thought, I'm letting two crooks connected with Galt get away. Jefferys will have my hide. But he went on working. At last a groan came from Spud's lips.

Ten minutes later Spud was able to sit up. "That sure is a wet river," he said weakly.

"You and your blondes," Kent answered, but he couldn't make it sound tough; he was too relieved to have fished Spud out of the river alive.

"She's a good actress," Spud answered. "Where do we go from here?"

"Back to that cottage."

"Goldie will be long gone." Spud grinned.

"She got a real ducking. She'll have to change her clothes." Kent gave the starter a jerk and the motor roared.

At the landing, Kent helped Spud out of the boat. He was weak, and his hands and legs were still numb and almost useless, but he refused any further help. The lights were on in the garage and the door leading into the cottage was open. Kent slipped his service revolver out of its holster and moved forward with Spud at his heels.

They passed through a kitchen, guided by light from another

room, and entered a living room. The cards Bernie and Metz had left on the table were still there. Kent began opening doors. The first door revealed an empty room. There was no furniture at all. The second door led to a bedroom. The room was in disorder. Dresser drawers were open, a closet door stood open. The indications were that the blonde had hurriedly packed a bag, taking some things and leaving others. Kent started searching the room. He pulled out drawers and looked for anything that might be taped to their ends and bottoms. He looked back of the pictures on the walls and under the rug. Spud sat on the bed watching him.

"Our pretty little babe sure evacuated in a hurry," Spud said. He sighed. "She's a shy little Ohio farmer's daughter," he added with a straight face.

Kent upended a vase and shook it. He shrugged his shoulders. "In her business she wouldn't have a single identifying thing with her," he said. "Let's go."

As they walked up the street to the trail into the woods, Spud told Kent what had happened.

"You never heard them talking?" Kent asked.

"No. After I got my hands loose, I knocked one of them down. The other sapped me, and he's an expert. I woke up in the garage, gagged and trussed like a mummy."

"I've tied the one called Bernie in with Galt," Kent said. "He's the one who spotted us at the motel."

"Several times Goldie slipped to the garage. There's a phone out there. She made a call each time. I think she does not confide all in Bernie and Metz," Spud said.

"Hear any names or places?" Kent's voice showed its eagerness.

"I remember exactly what she said each time," Spud an-

swered, then thought a little. "She said, 'Hi, Tommy. Same place.' "

"Probably a boy friend she doesn't want to have mixed up in the mess she's in," Kent answered.

"Could be, but Tommy might give us some answers."

"First thing we do is to get in touch with Jefferys. From now on I have a hunch Galt will have a rough time. Jefferys will be checking on Bernie and Metz and the blonde. His boys will have the fruit-sales deal to go on."

"What do we do?" Spud asked.

"I'm going to request permission to go out to Canaveral and find out a few things I don't know about missile firing," Kent answered.

"Be safer out there than poking around this town." They had reached the car. "You can call him while I eat a big steak."

CHAPTER 6

Missiles

COLONEL JEFFERYS listened intently to Kent's account of that day's activities. Once or twice he grunted. Kent ended his report by asking permission to check on some launching procedure. The colonel remained silent for a few seconds. When he spoke, his voice was gruff, but Kent knew he was pleased.

"I'll have men on Galt, but you work him your way." He paused. "As for checking launching procedure, yes, but that does not include borrowing a jet and flying the course."

"No, sir, not unless the trail leads that way," Kent answered.

"I sent you down there because you are not a man to follow the book. You showed that by letting two key agents get away while you pumped water out of Captain Murphy. I'll go along on any reasonable line of inquiry you think should be checked out." The colonel seemed reluctant about giving such consent.

"I consider Captain Murphy's life worth more than those thugs, sir," Kent said.

"This project is bigger than any of us," Jefferys snapped. "Just keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir."

Kent was smiling as he rang off. For once he had gotten his way with Colonel Jefferys. He felt very good as he headed up the street to the café where Spud was having his late dinner. He figured there would be no more attempts on their lives.

Spud was wading into a big dish of custard when he entered the café. He scooped up a spoonful and grinned at Kent. Kent dropped into a chair and pulled the handwritten menu toward him.

"What did the old man say?" Spud asked.

"We have a free hand—up to a certain point."

Spud grunted. He spooned up the last bite of custard. "Wonder if little Pat will be over at the Cocoa Tavern?" he mused.

"You need to hit the sack as soon as we leave here." Kent smiled at the girl who stood waiting for his order. "Chicken and dumplings," he said. "And iced tea."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Spud said sadly. He propped his elbows on the table. "Wonder how come we stirred up such a fuss? Nobody bothered Jefferys' regulars."

"If we knew that we'd be getting close to a solution," Kent answered gravely. "I'd say their big mistake was grabbing you."

"Almost wasn't any mistake," Spud reminded him.

"This Galt never seems to take chances. They must have something hot cooking." Kent started on the salad the girl placed before him.

Spud nodded sleepily. Now that he had eaten, the tension

began to relax, and he was sleepy. Kent ate his dinner in silence, allowing Spud to doze in his chair.

When they reached their cottage they saw a light in the front window. They approached the cottage, and Kent tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked. He opened it and looked inside. A captain sat in the chair next to the phone stand. He got to his feet when Kent and Spud entered.

“Barstow and Murphy?” the captain asked.

“Right,” Kent answered.

“I’m Captain Willet, Canaveral AAFB.”

Kent and Spud shook hands with Captain Willet. Spud moved to the bed. “Mind if I stretch out?”

“Not at all. I guess you must be bushed,” Willet said.

“I’ll be listening; just want to relax.” Spud stretched out and yawned.

Kent and the captain seated themselves. Kent waited, knowing Willet had come on business. Willet got out a pipe and filled it with tobacco. When it was going good, he started talking.

“Colonel Jefferys from AFCIN has cleared you for certain information regarding an Atlas missile shoot,” Willet said. He smiled at Kent, then got to his feet and walked across the room to the desk. He made a circle with his index finger and his thumb as he pointed to a reading lamp on the desk. Then he returned to his chair. Kent nodded, and he didn’t smile. Willet was letting him know the room was bugged and that somebody was listening to what they said. Willet went on talking. “You will be given certain written information and certain shoot schedules. These are to be destroyed if you should happen to be caught by foreign agents.”

“I’ll be on my guard from now on,” Kent said.

"You will keep these reports on your person at all times."

"Yes, sir."

"By the way, Jefferys also passed on the information that a man named Galt has been cleared so far as his office is concerned." Willet relighted his pipe and got to his feet. "I'll deliver the reports to you in the morning." He nodded toward the door.

Kent glanced at the bed. Spud was sound asleep. He followed Willet outside. They walked to the captain's car.

"This car isn't bugged," the captain said with a smile. "We can sit out here and talk."

They got into the captain's car. Kent leaned back thoughtfully.

"You have a suspicious nature, Captain," he said. "What made you check our cottage for a bug?"

"Certain people seem to be much interested in you. I hoped to find a microphone." The captain relighted his pipe.

"You plan to use us as bait?"

"That seems to be Jefferys' idea." Willet puffed deeply.

"That Jefferys," Kent growled. "I suppose he was sure you'd find a bug in our quarters."

"He seemed quite certain of it."

Kent laughed. "And of course Galt isn't cleared."

"On the contrary, Jefferys is concentrating on him. But Galt is a smooth operator. We followed him and watched him for weeks. He couldn't make a move we didn't know about or meet anybody we didn't check."

"He met one of the thugs who tried to murder Spud," Kent said dryly.

"I'd say that was the first time he has ever met one of his men in months. They have some other way of communicating.

That one time must have been a real emergency.” Willet tapped ashes out of his pipe.

Kent scowled. “Jefferys sent us down here to stir them up. He has an idea Galt has a personal grudge against me. He thinks Galt was connected with a mess I was in in the Far East.”

“I’ve heard you outwitted them on that mission,” Willet said.

“What irritates Jefferys is that he was never able to catch the master mind in this country. The colonel isn’t one to take that lightly.” Kent chuckled.

“You understand that this new development puts you on the spot.” Willet spoke grimly. “Murphy’s experience shows just how far they will go.”

“I’ll be looking over my shoulder,” Kent said, and he meant it.

Willet took an envelope out of his pocket. “I’ll drop by tomorrow morning, but you may as well have the fake schedules and information.”

Kent took the envelope and put it into an inside pocket. He glanced around the lighted courtyard with its lines of cottages. Big trees shaded most of the buildings. At night the shadows were deep and black under the trees. The few lights kept burning did not penetrate into the spaces between the cottages. He had a feeling that they were being watched.

“What about the Atlas?” he asked.

“It’s the AF’s ICBM. Range over six thousand miles. It’s ninety feet long with a take-off weight of one hundred tons. It travels at fifteen thousand miles per hour and leaves the earth’s atmosphere. The edge we have is that we can return the nose cone back through the atmosphere without its melting. We

think no other nation has developed such a metal skin. They'd like to get hold of one and analyze it."

"That much Jefferys told me," Kent said.

"Our guidance system gives the needed trim for accuracy and that is top secret, but no one will ever recover that part of an Atlas."

"How about the shoot dates?"

"Top secret, but you can't fire such a monster as The Beast without a lot of people knowing about it. The flight time on the long shot will be thirty minutes. With the right kind of transmitter news could be flashed to the landing area." Willet spoke soberly.

"That transmitter could be anywhere near?"

"But the receiver would have to be in the Atlantic near to the target spot. Our people feel that as long as only our pickup boats and planes know the exact target spot there will be no chance for a foreign crew to be close enough. They'd only have thirty minutes' notice and a lot of water to cover."

"That means there would have to be a leak as to target location here or out on Ascension," Kent said thoughtfully.

"Security insists there is no leak."

Kent laughed. "On my Far East mission the leak was right in Colonel Jefferys' office. That's why he won't buy the guarantee that there is no leak of information."

"There can always be one bad apple in a group," Willet admitted. "A lot of people work on the Atlas and a lot more handle instruments and controls when the missile is fired."

"So we try to smoke out the master mind."

"That's your job and Jefferys'. I better get along out to the base," Willet said.

Kent got out of the car. Willet started the engine, then leaned toward Kent, who was standing close to the car.

"Watch your step, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

The car backed away from him and turned around. Kent walked slowly back to the cottage. He stood at the door for a few minutes listening, then he entered.

Kent walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed. He shook Spud. Spud moaned in his sleep, then jerked and finally sat up. Kent leaned back as Spud doubled his fists. Then Spud recognized Kent. He smiled.

"Boy, I was ready to clobber you."

Kent held up his hand. He pointed toward the lamp on the desk, made a circle with his index finger and thumb, and shaped the word bug noiselessly.

Spud swung his feet off the bed. He stood up and started across the room. Kent pulled him back and winked.

"You were asleep while Captain Willet was talking. I'll give you the lowdown."

They sat on the bed and Kent told Spud what Willet had said while he was asleep. Spud caught on at once and went along with the play.

"Tomorrow we'll check that cottage where Goldie hung out. Tomorrow night we'll have another look at the house where Galt lives."

"We ought to get inside that house," Spud said.

"That shouldn't be hard to do." Kent yawned. "I'm ready to hit the sack."

"Me, too."

After the lights were out Kent lay thinking. He could give

his route and timing to Willet in the morning. If the unknown agents took the bait, they would strike at one of the places he and Spud visited. Kent thought it would be at the Galt house. That would give them cover of night.

CHAPTER 7

Bait

KENT and Spud played a game with the hidden mike. They talked freely as they dressed before leaving the cottage the next morning, but their talk was far from what they were thinking. They were very careful to make it sound casual. They had no intention of letting the enemy know they were aware of the presence of the little listening device concealed in the table lamp.

Spud dug into his bag and got out his service revolver and holster. He meant to make sure he wasn't kidnaped again. Silently he strapped on the holster and got into his coat.

When they were well away from the cottage, he said, "This time somebody's going to get hurt, and it won't be me."

"I'll drive. You watch for a shadow," Kent said. "But remember that Jefferys may have a tail on us, too. We don't want to shoot any of our own boys."

"If this Galt is so smart he may figure out that we're just

bait.” Spud frowned. He was spoiling for action and afraid they wouldn’t find any.

Kent was inclined to believe Spud might be right. Jefferys must have moved men into the vicinity. They ate breakfast and went out to the car. The street looked peaceful. If there was a stake-out it was not noticeable. They drove away from the café at a leisurely pace.

The cottage on the riverbank looked deserted. The blinds were drawn, there was no car in the driveway. The double garage was open and empty. Kent drove into the driveway and stopped close to the back door.

As they were getting out of the car an old man came out of a small summerhouse and walked toward them. He shuffled along, studying them out of pale blue eyes.

“You looking for a cottage to rent?” he asked after he had confronted them.

“We were looking,” Kent said.

“This is a nice quiet cottage. Good boat goes along with it. You aim to fish some?” The old man squinted from Kent to Spud.

“Sure,” Spud said. “And we like it quiet and peaceful.”

“That you’ll find it,” the old man assured him. “I never nose around. Live across town a piece.”

“It has been rented regular?” Kent asked.

“Steady for six months up until this morning. Girl named Eve Marin stayed here by herself. Had to leave in a hurry. Folks up North sick.” The old man pulled a sheet of note paper from his pocket. “Left this note tacked to the door. Still had two weeks’ rent paid up.”

Kent itched to get his hands on the note. It might have fingerprints on it. If the old man laid it down, he meant to grab it.

"We'd like to look the house over," Kent said.

The old man unlocked the back door and stood back. They entered, and he stepped inside after them.

"Just you look it over. I'll finish checking outside." He had the note still in his hand. Walking to a shelf beside the door, he put the note there along with two letters that were on the shelf. Then he went back to the yard.

Kent walked to the shelf and picked up the note. The chances that it would reveal any fingerprints were slim but he carefully eased it into an empty envelope from his pocket. Spud grinned at him as he tucked it away. Then he looked at the two letters. They were addressed to Eve Marin. The return address on each was Tommy Greer, Post Office Box 46, Orlando, Florida. Kent got out a notebook and copied down the name and address.

They looked into all the rooms. The bedroom where Goldie Marin had left part of her belongings was clean and neat. There was not a trace of Goldie left. Spud whistled softly.

"We missed the boat. She came back and got her things."

Kent nodded. "Nervy gal."

"Or somebody came and got them for her," Spud said.

Kent looked at his wrist watch. "We have to meet Willet back at the motel at eleven. How about checking out of that motel and renting this place for a couple of weeks?"

"Suits me," Spud said.

They went outside and located the old man back at the boat landing. He smiled at them.

"We like the cottage," Kent said.

"I figured you would."

"We'd like to rent it for a couple of weeks." Kent spoke with enthusiasm.

“Don’t usually rent for only two weeks.” The old man hesitated. “Have to get some extra. Be seventy-five dollars.”

Kent wanted to laugh. He was thinking what Jefferys would say when the expense account went in. What he said was, “We’ll take it.”

He counted out the money. As he handed the bills to the old man he asked casually, “Want us to forward Miss Marin’s letters? I see there are two for her.”

“She didn’t leave me any forwarding address.” The old man frowned. “Guess I’ll have to give ’em to the postman.” He turned away, then stopped and fished a ring of keys from his pocket. He handed them to Kent. “Door keys and boat key. The boat don’t have to be locked. Folks is honest around here.”

Kent and Spud grinned broadly. Kent took the keys and pocketed them. The old man walked away.

“We have a furnished cottage and a river full of fish at the back door,” Spud said. “How about me digging some bait?”

“It’s secluded, too,” Kent said. “I’ll bet there aren’t a dozen people go by in a month. The lane is a dead end.”

“Yeah. Remember to mention that when we get back where our mechanical ear can hear.” Spud smiled broadly.

They returned to their car, locked the back door, and started to get into the car. The old man came around the corner of the house. He stopped beside the car.

“I seem to have lost the girl’s note,” he said. “Either of you see it?”

“We saw you put it on a shelf,” Kent said.

“Well, it isn’t important.” The old man stepped back.

Kent started the car and backed out of the driveway. They had twenty minutes to get back to the motel. The lane ap-

peared deserted. Certainly no car was in sight or any pedestrians.

Willet was seated in his car waiting when they arrived at the motel. Pat Semple came out of the office and started picking roses from a bush in the yard. She glanced in their direction and Spud waved to her. She smiled back.

Kent and Spud got into Willet's car. Willet had his pipe going. He turned to the boys in the back seat.

"What's new?" he asked.

"We rented the cottage where they held Spud. Nice isolated spot." Kent grinned. "The gal evacuated last night. Left no forwarding address. But she was back last night and got all of her clothing and stuff."

"We picked up the pink convertible," Willet said. "It belongs to a Tommy Greer in Orlando."

Kent handed over the note. Willet smiled. Kent said, "We saw two letters from Tommy Greer the owner of the house had found in the mailbox."

Willet shoved the envelope into his pocket. "Her prints were all over that car. We're checking them out, but I'll bet a thin dime she has no record." He puffed thoughtfully. "Good move you made. That cottage was once a base of operations. But watch your step."

"We'll pack, and while we're inside we'll mention our destination," Kent said. "Any news from Jefferys?"

"You don't have to report to him unless you get something that needs his advice," Willet answered.

Kent and Spud got out of the car. Before turning away, Kent said, "How can we reach you?"

Willet handed him a card with an address penciled on the

back and two phone numbers, one marked "Office," the other "Home."

Willet drove away and Kent and Spud entered the cottage and began packing their things. Kent stuffed soiled shirts into his bag. He spoke over his shoulder.

"The cottage on the river will be just right for us. We won't be noticed."

"Nice of Goldie to get out so we could move in," Spud answered.

The boys moved into the cottage without incident. The place was so peaceful that Spud got restless. Their next move was on the Galt house, but there was a whole afternoon of waiting. Spud was prowling around the living room, Kent was reading a book.

"Guess I'll take a ride on the river; may even have a swim," Spud said.

Kent looked up from his book. "I'll stay here and finish my book."

Spud left the house after putting on his bathing suit. Kent settled down to his book, but he was alert. This was just too quiet. Three hours passed, and Spud returned. He changed to slacks and a sports shirt.

"You know something?" he said as he entered the living room.

"What?"

"That fellow Galt spends a lot of time on the river. He has set lines out. Thought down here it was all sport fishing."

"He may be an old-fashioned catfish man," Kent said.

"Never heard anybody mention catfish around here," Spud answered. "Anyway, don't think he caught anything. He went home empty-handed."

Kent grunted. He still had a chapter of his book to finish.

"Have any visitors?" Spud asked.

"Not even a mouse," Kent answered.

Spud went outside and stretched out in the shade of a tree. Kent finished his book and looked at his watch. It was time to drive into town for dinner. He went outside and found Spud asleep in the shade.

"Hey," he said loudly.

Spud sat up at once and blinked at Kent.

"You make a nice sitting duck snoring here in the open," Kent growled.

"It's so calm and peaceful around here that I'd be safe sleeping out in the lane," Spud answered. He got to his feet and flexed his arms. "I'm hungry."

"So am I."

They drove into town and Spud was so bored that he forgot to watch for cars that might be shadowing them. They changed eating places and went to the Tavern. Spud fed dimes into the jukebox but no pretty girls showed up. The dinner was not very good, but Spud enjoyed the bop records.

After dinner they drove around town awhile. Cocoa was a very modern city with a really swanky restaurant, supermarkets, department stores, and the usual five-and-dime and chain stores lining the streets. Kent watched his rear-view mirror but did not spot any car that stayed behind them for more than a block or two. He began thinking about driving out to Patrick Air Force Base, which is situated between the ocean and the Banana River. They would not visit Galt's house until eleven o'clock that night.

The base itself did not interest him, but he was interested in the installations at Cape Canaveral. Their credentials would

not take them far in that direction without a special clearance from Jefferys and Willet, but he could look the place over. He had a chart of the installations such as was passed out to anyone interested. It was accessibility he was interested in. How vulnerable was, say, the guidance area? He had started toward Highway 1-A-1 when he spotted the small car some way back. He had noticed it several times. He kept an eye on it as he headed toward the highway. It was three cars back when he turned into 1-A-1.

“Where we headed?” Spud asked.

“Out to operations at Canaveral.”

“We got no passes for that area.”

“Just a look-see.” Kent speeded up and watched the little car back of him. It stepped up its speed and passed two cars, dropping in three cars behind them. Kent grinned. If that car was a tail, it was a very clumsy operation.

They crossed the Banana River and approached the operational area. Kent kept to the main road. As he drove along, he realized that security was tight here. The information, if any was being passed out, was coming from someone who was trusted. And the small car was still behind him. He decided to turn back and shake his shadow.

Getting rid of the small car was no problem. Kent took several side streets, doubled back, and drove fast. After a half-hour of this he had lost the little car, and the time was nearing for their visit to the Galt house.

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CHAPTER 8

Dark House

WHEN the boys arrived at the Galt house it was dark. There was not a light in any of its windows. They parked the car on a side street beside the hedge Kent had used as a screen the day he had watched Bernie. They had flashlights and each checked his service revolver.

"I have a hunch nothing will happen," Spud said sourly.

"All we want is a look inside," Kent answered.

"The place has been gone over by experts, the phone is tapped, and right now there's probably a stake-out watching the house." Spud shoved his gun back into its holster.

"Remember, we're bait," Kent said. "Galt's supposed to know we plan to search the place."

"He's probably left a window open."

"Let's go see."

They moved past the hedge and into the grounds, keeping to the shadows cast by the shrubbery. They halted often, trying to locate the stake-out if there was one. They reached the

French windows facing the patio in the rear. Kent was prepared to force one of the windows, but when he turned the handle the window opened. He heard a snicker behind him.

They stepped into a room that was well supplied with shadowy outlines of furniture. As they stood in the center of the room, Kent realized that to search this big house would take time. And he had a feeling it would be useless. He and Spud had come to lure Galt into the open.

Spud had his gun in his hand. He intended being ready for anything. Kent remembered the location of the room Galt used as a bedroom. He moved out of the main room, along a hall, and stopped before the door he thought led to the bedroom. It was unlocked. He entered with Spud behind him. His flashlight beam showed that this was a bedroom and that it was used. There was a dressing gown tossed across the bed and there were papers and letters on a desk against the wall.

The boys crossed to the desk and Kent played his light over the letters. They had to do with real-estate matters, for the most part. Kent hurriedly scanned them. So far as they went Galt was a businessman with scattered interests ranging as far away as California.

The boys checked all of the rooms on the ground floor and found four bedrooms, all unused, and a den, which did not seem to be in use. They moved toward the living room, intending to go upstairs. They were in the middle of the big room when a light came on in the kitchen. The kitchen door was open and a band of light flooded in, catching Kent and Spud squarely. A woman screamed, and Kent leaped one jump ahead of Spud. The boys were lucky. There was a blast from the kitchen that shook the house. It was followed by a second blast.

Kent dived for the French window followed by Spud. They burst outside and plunged into a circular bed of shrubbery. From there they moved in the shadows to another stand of shrubbery. Loud voices came from the house. Lights came on. Kent and Spud peered out. They saw several men sprinting toward the house.

"The bait worked," Spud said exultantly. "But I don't like being blasted at with a double-barrel shotgun."

"Those must be Willet's men entering," Kent said. "Let's move in closer and see."

The boys edged closer to the big windows. From the bush closest to the windows they could look into the lighted living room. Three men armed with revolvers stood facing a burly fellow holding a shotgun. Beside him stood the middle-aged woman Kent had seen leaving the house. She was talking in a shrill voice.

"We been troubled with prowlers. I had Ab come with me to stay here tonight. There were two burglars in this room. Ab shot at them."

"You men detectives?" Ab's voice boomed. "If you be detectives, get out there and catch them robbers."

"We are officers, and we have men outside who will find the robbers," one of the men said. "We'd like to ask you a few questions, Ab."

Suddenly Kent caught Spud's arm and pulled him inside a circle of shrubbery. A flashlight was probing its way up a path leading from the river. The boys watched the light pick out the path.

The bearer of the light crossed the lawn and walked toward the French windows. It was a man, and when he stepped into the light Kent recognized Galt. He carried a fish basket and

a bucket as well as the flashlight. He set the basket and bucket down before entering the living room.

"Fishing this hour of the night," Spud muttered.

"That is something. Come on, let's get out of here." Kent started off fast.

"Why don't we go in and join the party?" Spud asked. "I figure Willet's men have real red faces."

"Could be," Kent answered. "But I've got my first real hunch since we started this business."

Once in the car Kent headed for the cottage on the river. He parked and jumped out. Spud piled out, too.

"Why all the rush?" he demanded.

"We're going for a boat ride. Hope we're not too late." He dashed toward the garage.

When they were in the boat, he turned to Spud. "Think you can find the spot where Galt was fishing?"

"Sure," Spud said. "You want to raid his set lines?"

"Exactly. I'm hungry for catfish."

The outboard started and they were off. Spud kept watching for landmarks and finally indicated they had about a hundred yards to go. Kent headed over to the west bank of the river and cut the motor. In the black shadows close to the bank they dropped anchor.

"Now what?" Spud asked impatiently.

"We wait."

They waited almost an hour before they heard an outboard. It was coming up the river. Kent started unstrapping the emergency oars. Spud watched him and listened. Presently they saw a boat coming. It showed quite clearly in the starlight and shore lights. When it was opposite them, the motor was cut and the boat drifted.

"That about where Galt set his floats?" Kent asked in a low voice.

"Just about where he dumped out the jug," Spud answered.

They watched the boat. There were two men in it. One of them steadied the boat with an oar while the other reached over the side. Kent could not see the jug, but he was sure the man had taken it from the water. A flashlight snapped on, and they saw the man pull the cork from the jug. The light went off. Presently there was a splash as the man tossed the jug back into the water. Then the boat started drifting back downstream without the outboard coming to life.

Kent fitted the oars into the locks and started paddling downstream, keeping close to the bank. Kent rowed fast enough to keep the boat in plain sight. It was less than fifty yards ahead. One man guided the boat with an oar but did not seem interested in increasing the speed.

"This could uncover the whole deal," Spud said in a low voice.

"Looks as though we've found their means of contacting Galt," Kent admitted.

The boat ahead turned toward shore. Kent let his boat drift. Then he lowered the oar and back-stroked. Below them the two men were getting out of their boat. One of them used a flashlight, which revealed their movements. They beached the boat and started climbing up a rise of ground. The flashlight winked off and on.

Kent checked the bank close by. Trees and bushes hung over the water. There was no chance to land. He let the boat drift down to the spot where the other boat was beached. Above, on the slope, the light had vanished. Spud got out and pulled the boat high on the mudbank. Kent joined him.

"Do we go after them?" Spud asked.

"We'll go up and see if we can locate their hideout. Didn't one of them remind you of the tall fellow called Bernie?" Kent said.

"I don't know. Too dark to be sure," Spud answered.

They started trying to follow the trail up the slope, but the growth was dense and the path crooked while the night under the trees was black. Kent finally had to use his flashlight. He used it sparingly, holding it very low. They climbed slowly up the bank and reached flat ground. They found themselves in a veritable jungle of vines and palmetto and bushes. The flashlight would have to be used more liberally if they hoped to penetrate the tropical growth.

"We better go back," Kent said.

"Why? We might be able to bag the gang, even get their transmitter," Spud argued.

The idea was tempting, but Kent knew it was not the wise course. They had found the agents' means of communication. If they played it smart, they could intercept messages.

"We will find out a lot by intercepting their messages," Kent explained.

"Yeah, now you're talking like Jefferys." Spud started back along the path.

Climbing up had taken a full half-hour. Kent wanted to return without using the flashlight. That took forty minutes. They were scratched by thorns, and sharp grasses cut their hands as they felt their way. At last they reached the mudbank. Here there was starlight. They could see quite clearly after the blackness of the jungle. There was only one boat pulled up on the mudbank.

Both boys knelt down beside the boat. It was not theirs. They stood up in silence for a full minute.

"I didn't pull it up far enough," Spud said. "When you got out, she floated."

"I hope so," Kent said. He kept his hand close to his shoulder holster. If the boat had been moved, someone might be lying in ambush. "Anyway, Jefferys just bought himself a boat."

"It will be picked up. They're all numbered and recorded," Spud said.

"That so?" Kent knelt beside the boat. He flashed his light on the prow. There were letters and numbers. He quickly memorized them.

"Owner rented boat to John Doe," Spud said with a chuckle.

"Owner may remember what John Doe looked like," Kent answered. "Now we have to get out of here. How far are we above our boat landing?"

"Couldn't be too far, but we may have to swim or wade most of the way," Spud answered.

They started out and found the mudbank extended only a few yards. They came face to face with jungle growth. Spud tested the river and found that by staying as close as possible to the bank the water came up to his armpits. He fastened his holster around his neck and Kent did the same. Spud was a far better swimmer and riverman than Kent. He took the lead.

They struggled along, clinging to overhanging bushes and vines. Twice in a hundred feet the water came up to their necks but they did not have to swim. Spud was cheerful and treated the whole thing as a lark. Kent faced it as a grim necessity. He was impatient to get back to the cottage where he could call Willet and Jefferys.

Spud was ahead, out of sight in the black shadows. Kent heard him splashing along, then Spud called back.

"I've come to our landing."

Kent moved faster, risking a ducking should he step into a deep hole. He came to the piers and felt along them until his hands found a ladder. He pulled himself up and stood dripping beside Spud.

"Let's get to the cottage and a phone," Spud said.

"Hold on," Kent warned. "Our phone may be tapped. Anyway, we check for a hidden bug first. Even if we don't find one, we'll change clothes and drive to town where we can call from a pay booth."

"Yeah," Spud said soberly. "And we better check a bit before going in."

They approached the house cautiously, walking around it and checking the lane. It appeared deserted. Kent moved to the front door and got out the ring of keys the old man had given him.

"We'll go in this way. Anyone waiting for us would expect us to use the back door."

"And anyone who visited us earlier and saw the car might suspect we were on the river," Spud suggested.

"In that case they'd have jumped us as we entered the garage from the landing," Kent said.

Kent unlocked the door and turned the knob slowly. They entered a hall that led to the living room. Kent did not switch on the hall light. He nudged Spud, then started pulling off his soggy shoes. Spud did the same thing. They moved down the hall in their sock feet. When they reached the open doorway leading into the living room, Kent pulled out his gun. He reached into the room and switched on the lights.

There was no one in the room. The boys entered and dropped their wet shoes on the table. Both had their guns out. Kent nodded to one bedroom door and Spud started for it. Kent took the other. He paused to switch on the lights in the small kitchen, which was a part of the living room. Then he opened the bedroom door and switched on the light.

"No one here," Spud called from the other room.

Kent entered the bedroom he and Spud used. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. He checked a table lamp, looked back of the mirror, and along the baseboards for wires. In a frame house with wallboard instead of plaster a mike could be concealed any place, and the wires need not be in the room at all. Spud entered. Kent put a finger to his lips. He spoke casually.

"That sure was a good hike we had. We ought to hike every night. Do us good."

"Reckon that was a wildcat we flushed?" Spud asked.

"More likely somebody's tomcat on the prowl." Kent laughed.

The boys quickly changed into dry clothes. They left the cottage by the back door. Kent drove into town fast. His watch told him it was four o'clock in the morning, but he knew where he could locate Jefferys. They stopped at the first pay booth they came to. Spud stayed in the car to check if anyone drove along the street back of them.

As Kent entered the phone booth, a sedan passed slowly along the street. Kent watched it. The car kept on going and took a right turn into a side street. He put through his call. Within five minutes he heard Jefferys' sleepy voice over the wire.

"That you, Barstow?"

"I'm calling from a pay booth. We hit pay dirt tonight."

"Where have you been for the last three hours? Willet's called three times."

"We've been swimming," Kent answered.

"Well, you stirred things up at the Galt house. Mrs. Pike and her husband are clear, and Galt is threatening to sue our men because Pike blasted two holes in a wall." Jefferys was snappy. "What you found out better be good."

"It's too good to tell over a phone, even your private home line," Kent answered. "Can we talk to Willet?"

"Willet's in charge down there. He'll report to me tomorrow by closed wire," Jefferys answered.

"Thank you, sir." Kent hung up quickly.

As he stepped out of the booth, the same sedan he had seen pass the booth appeared out of the side street and drove past slowly. There were two men in it.

CHAPTER 9

River Chase

KENT stood at the curb watching the sedan move down the street. After it had passed them, it speeded up and went roaring away.

“Somebody got an eyeful,” Spud said.

“I had better call Willet.” Kent fished his notebook from his pocket and headed back toward the phone booth. Before closing the door he checked Captain Willet’s home number. He got no reply from Willet’s home number. But when he called the office number, Willet, himself, answered the phone.

“Barstow!” Willet exclaimed before Kent had time to give his name. “We’ve been combing the woods around the Galt place for you.”

“I’m calling from a sidewalk booth two doors down from the Cocoa Tavern on the boulevard. Can you run out here?”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Shall I bring some of my men?”

“Two or three if you can get them fast,” Kent answered.

"I have them here. See you in twenty minutes." The receiver clicked as Willet hung up.

Kent went out to the car and got in. Spud leaned back and yawned. "Where do we go from here?" he asked.

"We wait here for Willet."

"He better show up fast. I'm about to go to sleep." Spud yawned again.

"Go ahead. You have twenty minutes for a nap." Kent eased himself over so that he could see back down the street through the rear-view mirror.

"Who you expecting?" Spud asked sleepily.

"Somebody might figure I wouldn't say anything over the phone," Kent answered.

Spud sat up with a jerk. "You don't think they spotted us on the river or on that path, do you?"

"I don't know. I'm just being careful."

"If you want to be careful, why do we stay put here like sitting ducks?" Spud demanded.

"One way to find out for sure," Kent answered.

They sat for five minutes watching and listening, then they heard a car. Almost at once it turned into the boulevard at an intersection across the street. It was moving fast and it headed toward them. Kent jerked out his service revolver.

"Hit the deck!" he snapped as he slid down into the bottom of the car.

Spud went over the seat and into the back like a cat. Kent heard his chunky body hit the floor of the car. Then there was a familiar chatter of staccato blasts. Kent felt bullets slamming into the car. The machine-gun burst was short. Kent lay still for a space. He could tell by the roar of the departing car's engine that the would-be killers had the throttle wide open. No

use to try for a shot. Perhaps better not to let the attackers know they had failed. He called to Spud.

“Stay down!”

Spud didn't answer. Kent heaved himself up onto the seat and leaned over. Spud lay face down on the floor of the car and he wasn't moving. Kent reached down, feeling for a wrist. He found Spud's right wrist and checked for a pulse. He felt a faint beat. Scrambling over into the back, he turned Spud over gently. He felt for his flashlight but could not find it. Leaning over the seat, he switched on the dash light. The flashlight lay on the floor in front. Kent climbed over and got it. He returned to the back seat and played the light over Spud. Blood was seeping down across Spud's cheek. Kent bent over his pal. Spud had been hit in the head. Kent could not tell if it was from a bullet or flying metal, but it looked bad.

Kent was getting out of the car to call for an ambulance when a police patrol with two officers in it pulled up behind his car. One of the officers leaped out with a drawn gun.

“Hands up!” the officer snapped.

“We've been machine-gunned,” Kent answered as he raised his hands. “There's a badly wounded man in the back.”

The officer moved forward cautiously. He kept Kent covered as he looked into the back of the car, then he called to his partner. “Lend a hand, Charlie. Wounded man in the back of this car.”

Charlie came fast. Kent lowered his hands. “We're Air Force men. Captain Willet will be along in a few minutes. Get an ambulance for him.” He jerked his head toward the car.

“Identification?” The officer did not move.

Kent pulled out his wallet and opened it. The officer flashed

his light on the open wallet. Charlie had taken a look at Spud and started for the patrol car to put through a call.

The officer facing Kent said, "I'm Dean, Cocoa Police. What happened here, Barstow?"

"We were waiting for Captain Willet when a dark Chevrolet sedan, probably a 1955 model, turned into the boulevard and opened up on us with a sub-machine gun," Kent answered.

Charlie had joined them. "Ambulance on the way. I'll do what I can to stop his bleeding." He turned toward the car. Kent and Officer Dean went along.

"Let him handle it," Dean said. "He's had training." He caught Kent's arm and held him back.

"Is he alive?" Anger had started to build up inside Kent. It was a delayed action, but it struck with force. Much of it was against himself. He had stood outside the car answering the officer's questions while Spud lay bleeding.

"He's alive," Charlie answered. He had his first-aid kit open and was working on Spud's head.

The wail of a siren came to them and in a few seconds they saw the ambulance's winking red lights. The ambulance pulled up and attendants jumped out. A white-jacketed young man shoved Charlie aside and leaned over Spud. Other attendants moved in with a stretcher. Spud was placed on the stretcher and loaded into the ambulance. The white-coated intern spoke briefly to Officer Dean. Kent heard his words.

"Looks like a D.O.A. to me."

Kent stared helplessly at the closing doors of the ambulance. Dead On Arrival. It couldn't be. He wanted to leap forward and demand that they let him ride with Spud, but iron discipline kept him rooted to the spot where he stood. He had to report to Willet and he had to avenge Spud. Grimly he told

himself that the young intern couldn't be right. Spud had to pull through.

The ambulance pulled away, its siren moaning. The two officers walked to their car and Officer Dean started his report with a request for an alert on the sedan. Kent thought the request was being made very late but he did not say anything. Both officers were very young and probably not experienced.

Kent got into his car and sat looking at the damage. He would need a new windshield. The steering wheel had been hit in two places. Luckily the fire had been directed at the head-and-shoulder level of a seated man.

The patrol car pulled alongside. Kent leaned out. "I'll wait here for Captain Willet," he said.

Officer Dean was back of the wheel. He lifted a hand and drove away. Kent settled down to wait. Within five minutes Willet arrived. He had three men with him. Willet sat for a moment or two staring at the smashed windshield and at the bullet-punctured side of the car.

"When did this happen?" he asked as he got out of his car.

"Five minutes after I called you."

"Recognize any of them?"

Kent got out of the car. "I think we have enough to pick up Galt. I'll give you a shakedown on the way over. I have a hunch we should hurry."

Kent got into the back of the military car with Willet. The driver knew the address and did not need to be urged to drive fast. They roared away down the boulevard.

Kent told Willet what had happened from the time they entered the Galt house until they were attacked. Willet grunted with anger when Kent told him Spud had been hit.

"Thought you might have him on a stake-out," he said.

"We'll get those thugs, and when we do—" His voice trailed off.

"I'd like to be in on the kill," Kent said.

"You think they may have spotted you when you followed them?" Willet asked. "They clearly figured that you had something to report and would simply set up a meeting over the phone. If they got you, their communications system would still be intact."

"If they think they succeeded, we may find Galt at the house," Kent said grimly. "If they have a feeling they missed one of us, we won't find him."

"I'd sure like to have a few days to eavesdrop on their cat-fish line," Willet said.

"I see now we should never have followed them," Kent said ruefully.

"At a time like that you have to decide. Now it looks wrong. But those men in the boat could have led you to a transmitter and the end of the trail." Willet spoke thoughtfully.

They reached the Galt house and drove into the yard. There were no lights, but none would be expected at so early an hour. The men got out of the car.

"Two of you cover the back," Willet ordered.

Two of the men moved off. Willet and Kent walked to the front door with the third man. Willet punched the bell button, and they heard the bell ring inside the house. But there was no response. Willet rang again. They waited a minute, and he rang a third time.

Willet tried the knob. The door was locked. He turned to his man. "Go around back and try the French windows." The man left and they waited. Within three minutes the officer who had gone to check the French windows opened the front door from the inside.

"Switch on the lights," Willet ordered.

The officer found the hall-light switch and flipped it. Nothing happened. "Must have a blown fuse," the officer said.

"Our bird has flown," Willet answered. "He's probably unscrewed the fuses and thrown them away to slow down a search."

"Or he may be holed up here waiting to be picked up," Kent said. "This is a big house. With the lights off, he might figure he could get away with it."

"Call in the boys," Willet said. "We'll give this house a real combing."

Kent flashed his light along the hall. He moved toward the big living room.

"Watch your step," Willet warned.

"I want to get to a phone," Kent answered. "Have to find out about Spud." He moved into the big room and flashed his light around. He spotted the telephone near the entrance where he stood.

Dialing the operator, he asked for the number of the hospital where the ambulance men had taken Spud. He got the number and dialed it. A girl answered.

"I want to ask about Captain Murphy who was brought in about an hour ago. This is official."

"I'll check, sir." The line hummed while Kent waited. He felt dampness forming in the palm of the hand that held the receiver. Presently the girl's voice said, "You can talk to the intern in charge of the emergency section." There was another wait, then a man's voice came on.

"I'm calling about Captain Murphy," Kent said.

"Oh, yes, the head wound." There was a rustling of papers. "Metal splinter—"

"How is he?" Kent broke in.

"Oh, he's sitting up and in a very bad mood. You can take him off our hands any time. We don't have a bed for him, but we felt we should hold him to check for shock."

A great surge of relief filled Kent. "Thanks," he said. "We'll take him off your hands."

"How is he?" Willet had stopped close to Kent.

Kent grinned. "Sitting up. He just got a gash from a splinter of metal. The medic says he's in a foul mood."

"Good." Willet picked up the receiver and started dialing. His men entered the room and started searching the house. Willet started machinery moving which would spread an alarm for Galt and would send a squad to check the boat landing on the river and search the shore above the mudbank. When he finished his calls, he turned to Kent, who had returned from searching the kitchen. "This lights-out business may have been a trick to make sure we did waste time searching the house," he said.

"Galt seems to know what he's doing. He certainly had a reason for blacking out this place," Kent admitted.

Two hours later Willet's men gave up the search. They had covered every foot of space inside the house and had found no trace of Galt or any papers or anything else that might connect him with undercover activities. Even the business letters Kent had seen were gone. Willet had been on the phone most of the time.

They all stood out in the yard, looking at the house. The sun was up and the house looked like any peaceful residence.

"We'll drop you boys off and then go get Murphy," Willet said. "Get some sleep." He smiled wearily. "I'll be calling Jefferys, and I expect to have a rugged time with him."

CHAPTER 10

Down Range

SPUD sat on a couch in a small waiting room outside emergency surgery. His head was bandaged, and he could not wear his hat. The intern had told him Kent would pick him up. That was two hours ago. As the time passed, Spud's anger mounted. He wanted to get some action. The thugs who had blasted Kent's car were getting a big lead. They might be captured before he got out of the hospital. Several times he had started to leave but changed his mind. Every time a nurse or orderly passed he scowled bleakly.

Then after another half-hour had passed the elevator door opened and Kent stepped out, followed by Willet. Spud leaped to his feet, clutching his hat.

"Where you been?" he barked.

Kent laughed. "We dashed out to Galt's house. Our bird had flown."

"You been all this time finding that out?"

"Willet's boys took the place apart."

Spud turned to Willet. "Did you catch the gunmen?"

"Not yet," Willet answered wearily. "We'll drive you to the cottage and you can get some rest. Barstow and I have to make a call to the Pentagon."

"I don't need any rest," Spud growled. "I'll go along with you."

They left the hospital and drove out to Patrick Air Force Base. There was much activity in Willet's department. A Colonel Hendy had been flown in and several others were expected. Jefferys smelled action and was getting ready.

"Better call Jefferys," the colonel said after they had greeted each other. "I didn't have much for him."

Willet nodded. He sank into a chair back of his desk and pulled the phone toward him. Before dialing he motioned Kent and Spud to chairs near his desk. He put through his call and got an immediate connection.

Kent sat listening to Willet's report. It was concise and brief. It was not interrupted by Jefferys. But after Willet finished he sat listening to his chief for a full five minutes. Occasionally he said, "Yes, sir." Finally he extended the receiver toward Kent and shoved the phone across the desk. "Colonel Jefferys wishes to talk to Lieutenant Barstow," Willet said formally.

Kent took the receiver. "Barstow speaking, sir."

Colonel Jefferys' voice crackled over the wire. "You and Murphy think you're a one-man army?"

"No, sir," Kent said.

"Then why try to act like one? Don't yes, sir, me. Next time you get a hot lead, call in some help."

Kent remained silent. He thought of many things he wanted to say, but this was no time to add to Jefferys' irritation.

"I have an assignment for you men that will get you out of

Willet's hair. I've assigned a T-33 to you and you are to fly the down range to Ascension."

Kent allowed himself a big grin, which he would never have dared had he been within sight of the colonel.

"Make a check at Turk, the Dominican Republic, and St. Lucia on the way out. Checking for transmitters and receivers is more in your line. You'll have time enough before the shoot."

"Do we check out from Operations at Patrick?" Kent asked.

"After a briefing from Colonel Hendy." Jefferys' voice lost some of its hardness. "You will be under our protection only while on base in those islands, but we have good police connections. This is, in fact, a foreign assignment."

Not a word about how close he and Spud had come to being killed, just a tough mission where the enemy agent had a freer hand to act.

Kent took a chance. "Yes, sir," he said.

He wasn't quite sure, but he thought he heard a chuckle at the other end of the line just before Jefferys hung up.

Spud was impatient to know what was up. He had been watching Kent's face and knew something was up. "Well?" he demanded.

"We got us a T-bird and we're off along the down range," Kent answered.

"Hurrah!" Spud shouted.

Willet frowned at Spud. Colonel Hendy smiled.

"I expect you'll be glad to get rid of us," Kent said to Willet.

"No. With you boys around, things happen." Willet smiled.

Kent turned to Colonel Hendy. "You are to brief us, sir."

"Before or after you have some breakfast and a few hours' sleep?" the colonel asked.

"I guess we eat and get some sleep," Kent said.

"How about this afternoon at three?" The colonel looked at Willet. "Do you have a room we can use, Captain?"

"I'll find you a room," Willet answered.

Spud and Kent left Willet's office. One of the base cars took them to where they had left Kent's car. It had received much attention from curious people. A group of young boys wanted to know what had happened.

"You gangsters?" one of the boys asked.

"We're gangbusters," Spud answered.

Kent tried the starter and the motor worked smoothly. By looking around the spatter of holes in the windshield, Kent was able to drive. They stopped at the small café and had breakfast. Spud had begun to think things over.

"I'll bet Jefferys is sending us off in an old T-bird to get rid of us. We'll miss out on the big killing." He shoved a large piece of hot cake into his mouth and scowled. "I don't like the idea of letting those rats get away with almost killing me twice."

"The agents we run into on the islands will be just as tough," Kent said reassuringly.

"If we run into any."

"We will if we play it smart."

Spud grunted. He went on eating without arguing any more.

"Colonel Hendy may give us some leads when he briefs us," Kent said.

They paid their checks and drove to the cottage. Nothing had been disturbed, but they were careful. Spud eased the door open and stepped back.

"I'm ready for anything," he said as he peered inside. "Could be land mines."

Kent grinned even though the idea of a booby trap was not pleasant. Spud was really spooked. They entered the cottage and walked to their room. In ten minutes they were in bed and asleep with Kent's pocket alarm clock set for two o'clock.

Colonel Hendy's briefing consisted mostly of names of men who checked all signals along the down range. Any unidentified signals or messages were at once traced to their source. The boys would be equipped with some very special receiving instruments covering a wide band range.

Kent came away from the briefing with a feeling that not much was expected of him and Spud by the colonel. He had been instructed to call Jefferys. He made the call in one of Willet's empty offices. Jefferys spoke rapidly.

"I'm not sending you down range to get rid of you. You stirred things up in Florida. Play it your way and see if the regulars haven't missed something. I've given you three islands, and not by chance. Look for receiving sets. I know that's a big job, but do what you can."

"Yes, sir," Kent said. To him such a task looked like searching for a wheat straw in haystack.

Spud shared his opinion. He figured they were off on a wild-goose chase. "We're supposed to ask everyone what kind of set they got," he grumbled.

"Just the high-powered kind," Kent said, but he knew the set could be a pocket resistor type or even an ordinary portable.

They drove out to Patrick and left Kent's car in a shop to be repaired. From there they went to Operations. They had dropped their bags off at Bachelor Officers' Quarters.

Kent handed in his orders. The officer receiving them scanned them, then looked at Kent sharply.

"You got some jet time?" he asked casually.

Spud spoke up for Kent. "He got his last jet time at Kadena. Before that he was flying tests at Edwards."

The officer smiled. "We got an aircraft for you. The brass in Washington asked for one armed with air-to-ground rockets. Know that end?"

"I do," Kent said shortly.

"Just wanted to make sure you didn't drop any of them on us," the officer said with a grin.

Spud did not see anything funny about the kidding the desk officer had pulled on them. Kent grinned as he turned away from the desk.

"At last we're in a spot where we won't be shot at," he said as they left Operations.

"Looks like they could have given us something better than an old T-bird," Spud growled.

"A T-33 equipped with air-to-ground rockets is a mean lady," Kent answered. "Jefferys had something in mind when he asked for one. Remember we're going out to the target area."

"Yeah," Spud agreed, and brightened at once.

CHAPTER 11

Voodoo

DELIVERY PILOT Captain Bill Finney smiled broadly at Kent when he handed over his papers the next morning. He shook hands with Kent and Spud.

“Got a surprise for you boys,” he said. “You’re flying an F-101 rigged with air-to-ground rockets.”

Spud’s face broke into a broad grin. “Hot dog, a McDonnell Voodoo.”

“Right.” Captain Finney tossed his clip board under the counter. He turned to Kent. “Our commander tells me you’ve test flown most of the stuff tested at Edwards.”

“I’ve had several tours of duty there,” Kent answered with a smile. He had set a record or two in the aircraft being assigned to him. The idea of flying a Voodoo south stirred excitement in him. This plane had racked up twelve hundred and seven and six-tenths miles per hour in one test.

Kent and Spud moved out of the office and headed for the flight line. Captain Finney went with them.

They drove out to the flight line. Before unloading their gear from the station wagon they stood looking at the Voodoo.

The McDonnell F-101 Voodoo was originally designed as a SAC escort fighter. It had been transferred to the Tactical Air Command as an all-weather, multipurpose aircraft, with versatile heavy armament. It was powered by two Pratt and Whitney J-57-13 turbojets. In addition to the rockets the Voodoo carried four twenty-mm cannon. With its long fuselage and high tail it looked formidable. Spud shook his head eagerly.

"Lots of airplane," he said.

"And you're going out loaded for bear." There was a hint of curiosity in Captain Finney's voice.

Kent smiled but said nothing. He and Spud got their gear together and started loading. After that they made the usual rigid check outside and inside of the Voodoo. Captain Finney waved and drove away.

The boys got set with Kent in the pilot's seat. From now on their talk would be strictly intercom over the aircraft's phone system. The jets roared to life, and Kent eased the Voodoo out to the flight line. He swung the aircraft around into place on the nine-thousand-foot flight line, braked, and waited.

"You ready, Barstow?" a voice from the control tower asked.

"Rodge," Kent answered.

"You're cleared, Barstow."

"I'm rolling." Kent gave the throttle a nudge and the ship started rolling.

The F-101 was no ground lover. With as much lift as all of the elevators in a skyscraper the F-101 ate up the runway. Kent glanced at his rpm indicator. It read 100 per cent, but

they still had not left the concrete runway. He shifted to his afterburner. There was a sharp jerk, and with a bang the F-101 shot forward like a rocket. In seconds the F-101 was off and climbing into the sky.

Spud glanced down to check. He could see no wings at all. He could as well have been riding a wingless rocket. Below him Patrick Air Force Base dropped away into the warm haze of the summer day. Kent started to level off. He wasn't after a speed record, nor was he after altitude, but he did want to get up where the F-101 would have hairtrigger response. At thirty thousand the F-101 was responding smoothly.

The hop to Grand Turk Island was a short one for the F-101, which is a long-range jet. The six hundred and sixty miles were covered in less than one hour. As they circled and waited to come in, Kent looked down upon the island. Its area was twelve square miles. He wondered why Jefferys had asked him to check here. He knew the island had a population of only eighteen hundred people, most of them engaged in mining salt, with a few natives taking crawfish for the Miami market. Grand Turk is Station Number Seven in the down-range course of forty-four hundred miles to Ascension. The Bahama chain of islands made a natural tracking course for testing the big missiles.

Kent swung in for a landing. The runways on the station along the missile range are all short, none exceeding six thousand feet. A less skillful pilot would have hesitated at landing the Voodoo on such a runway, but Kent had landed the F-101's on even shorter strips. He cut his distance neatly, taking advantage of every yard of the black top. He kicked loose his drag chute and felt the sudden pull from behind as it billowed out. The Voodoo eased to a crawl and Kent swung

around and taxied toward the waiting ground crew. The Voodoo came to a halt, and Kent released the canopy. When the boys climbed down, they were met by a smiling second lieutenant.

"I'm Lieutenant Terry Moore."

Kent took the hand. "I'm Kent Barstow, and this is Spud Murphy."

Moore shook Spud's hand. He looked at the F-101. "Where did you find this?" he asked.

"Compliments of Patrick," Kent answered.

"Why a visit here?" Moore asked. "This is a deadly quiet place."

Kent glanced at the ground crew. They were all busy working on the F-101. "We'll get our bags and talk on the way to quarters," Kent said.

They got their bags and loaded them into the jeep Lieutenant Moore had driven to the flight line. As they drove to the small operations office, Kent explained as much as he thought Moore should know.

"You check all newcomers to Grand Turk?" he asked.

"Sure. That's why I'm here."

"Have any visitors lately?"

"Only a swanky cruiser with a tourist party aboard," Moore answered. "Sorry to see them go. They served swell food."

"What were they doing here?" Kent asked.

"Swimming, partying, and some fishing," Moore answered.

"What was the name of the cruiser?"

"The *Sea Queen*." Moore grinned broadly. "Only the usual transmitter. So far as our check went, and it covered her twenty-four hours a day, she never sent any messages. We

monitored her outgoing messages. Just one to a Florida gal who had missed the trip."

"Where was this girl?"

"Cocoa," Moore answered.

"You have a copy of the message?" Kent was instantly interested.

"In the records," Moore answered.

"We'll have a look at it after Spud and I toss our bags into a room," Kent said.

Spud grinned at him but made no comment.

The boys put their bags into a room and went with Moore to his office. The lieutenant had two men working with him. They were plainly bored with their job. Moore frowned at them.

"Thought you were checking those crawfish men?"

"None of them owns anything but a crawfish net," one of the airmen said.

The other added, "We checked the huts."

"Take a break over at the canteen," Moore said.

The two airmen left, and Moore went to a filing cabinet. He got out a folder and opened it. After leafing through it he handed a sheet to Kent. Spud looked over his shoulder, and they read the short message together. It had been sent to Eve Marin to be delivered by a ham operator with call letters XED. The ham had a set in Orlando. The message read:

YOU ARE MISSING A GRAND CRUISE.

The message was signed "Sea Queen Gang."

"That ham could be Tommy Greer," Spud said.

"Now we know why Jefferys had us stop here," Kent said.

"We'll give him the word and have him comb the island."

"You think the *Sea Queen* slipped one over on us?" Moore asked.

"Could be. This message went to a gal agent," Kent answered.

"Hope Jefferys don't make us search this island," Spud said.

"But we've checked every possibility," Moore protested.

"I'll have to get a message through to Jefferys," Kent said.

"That we can do," Moore assured him.

Kent sat at Moore's desk and made out his report to Jefferys. He got charter information on the *Sea Queen* and passenger listings from Moore. When he finished, Moore went off to have the message coded and sent. There was nothing to do but wait.

Kent and Spud were eating lunch at the mess kitchen when Moore came along with Jefferys' message. It had been decoded. It was brief. Jefferys would check out on the *Sea Queen* and have men flown in to go over the island. They were to move on to the Dominican Republic. If the *Sea Queen* was there, they were to try to connect her with foreign agents on the island. If she had left, they were to push on to Ascension.

The hop to the Dominican Republic base was only one hundred and seventy miles. Kent decided not to stay on Grand Turk that night. In a half-hour they could be there and would have much of the afternoon left to check up on the *Sea Queen*.

The boys got a jeep and driver. They picked up their bags and drove to Operations. Kent easily cleared his flight. He had top priority on all down-range bases.

They took off and flew at just over ten thousand feet. The F-101 did not like the low-altitude flying, but Kent did not want to bother with going up higher. They were soon heading

in over the Dominican Republic. This was a large island, nineteen thousand square miles. It was heavily populated, having almost two million people. It would not be so easy to check as Grand Turk. Kent came in and set the F-101 down. There was a ground crew and a jeep waiting.

CHAPTER 12

Trail of the Sea Queen

SPUD and Kent were met by Major Breed after they climbed out of the F-101 at the Dominican Auxiliary Air Force Base. The major had already been contacted by Jefferys. The Dominican Republic had international telephone and wire services as well as RCA communications. Kent listened while Major Breed talked.

"The *Sea Queen* was here. She stayed a week. We checked her as we do all incoming boats. But a lot of pleasure craft visit the island."

"With the mountains and valleys and dense vegetation a search and check of the countryside would be tough," Kent said.

"Impossible, but we can monitor messages sent and received if they do not get past our capacity." The major smiled. "Which is what they do every day of the week."

"I guess there isn't much for us here," Kent said. "We'll take off tomorrow for Ascension."

"There is one item we checked out after I talked with Jefferys," Major Breed said. He smiled at Spud.

"A blonde?" Spud asked.

"A blonde named Eve Marin. She was making the night spots with a young man from Florida. He got into a hassel over her in a bar so we have an item on her." The major shook his head sadly. "We never knew about her until yesterday."

"The young man was Tommy Greer of Orlando?" Kent asked.

"That's right."

"Jefferys will have her checked out," Kent said. "But I'll bet she's clean except for the deal with Spud."

"Those agents go to a lot of trouble to establish themselves as respectable citizens," Major Breed said thoughtfully. "Some have been in business or held down good jobs for years."

"Looks like they'd get wise," Spud said. "The American way is far ahead of anything they have at home."

"Most of them are fanatics. They have a hatred for our way," Breed answered. "Top men like Galt believe they will get to run things in this country if their government takes over here."

"And what does a blonde like Goldie figure on getting?" Spud asked.

"Excitement and adventure, clothes, jewelry, things she probably would not have otherwise. Jefferys will probably find she has had a very poor background." Major Breed stopped the jeep in a parking space close to his office.

The boys and the major got out and entered Breed's headquarters. He had three small offices, but no one was working in any of them. They entered Breed's office, and he closed the door, then switched on the air-conditioning unit.

"Jefferys wants to talk to you, Barstow," he said, and nodded toward a desk with a phone on it. "We have a private line from the base."

Kent sat down and dialed his special number. After a short wait he was connected with a Pentagon phone. He was quickly switched to Jefferys' phone. The chief answered.

"Barstow at Station Number Eight, Dominican AAFB," Kent said.

"Should have sent you straight on to Ascension, Barstow. Things are beginning to pop. We are very sure the men we want are there and that they know every one of our agents on the island. I won't be able to get new men in for at least three days. You and Murphy get there fast and start working."

"Have any idea what we're looking for or any description of the men we're after?" Kent asked.

"The island has exactly one hundred and seventy native population. We have two men there, plus the usual base security. Except for base labor and technical personnel all of the natives have been there a long time."

"What about the *Sea Queen*?" Kent asked.

"She has disappeared," Jefferys answered. "No contacts with her for a week."

"There's a lot of water out here," Kent answered. "If she's in the vicinity of Ascension she's in the middle of the South Atlantic."

"She's equipped for long-range cruising. She could stay out for months," Jefferys said impatiently.

"She was checked and didn't have any gear to recover a nose cone," Kent said.

"She's tied into this plot," Jefferys insisted.

"We have patrol ships at Ascension and the target area will be covered," Kent argued.

"I know, I know," Jefferys snapped. "But I'm sure they have worked out a plan. I don't want to be caught flat-footed."

"Have you rounded up anyone?" Kent asked.

"We got Bernie Grout but there is no trace of Metz or the girl. Tommy Greer turned out to be a respectable young man. The girl used him as a front." Jefferys was clearly frustrated and in a bad mood.

"You are sure of everyone on Ascension?"

"As sure as you can be."

"Are we to have a target area given us?" Kent asked.

"It will be given to you at Ascension. By word of mouth."

Kent frowned. Jefferys was getting jittery. Verbal data was given to an operator only under circumstances where he would be in danger of being ambushed and captured.

"Pretty tight security," Kent observed.

"We're in a tight spot," Jefferys snapped.

"We'll take off early tomorrow morning," Kent said.

"Good." The receiver at the other end clicked and the line went dead. Kent turned to Spud, who was sitting across the desk from him.

"They got Bernie."

"Just one?" Spud scowled.

"They cleared Tommy Greer."

Major Breed got to his feet. "I'll run you over to your barracks. My men are checking on the passengers on the *Sea Queen*."

"You think they unloaded the women and some of the others here?" Kent asked.

"Could be. We never checked up to see. Had no reason to." Breed put on his cap.

"I'd like to know if you locate any of them," Kent said.

"I'll let you know."

They left the offices, and Major Breed drove them to the officers' barracks. After they were settled, he left. Spud prowled around the room impatiently. Finally he halted and faced Kent.

"How about looking for some fun tonight?"

"Wait until we hear from Breed. Could be we'll find some excitement."

"Thirty-five hundred miles from target area?" Spud said, and laughed.

"If they unloaded passengers here, we might be able to learn something about the *Sea Queen*," Kent answered.

"They'll all be legit like Tommy Greer."

"But they may have overheard something or they may be able to give us some dope on the crew." Kent grinned. "I understand there were some pretty girls aboard."

Spud brightened. "That's so. If they're here, they should be contacted."

That evening Major Breed joined them at the Officers' Mess. He had news, and proceeded to give it to them at once.

"The *Sea Queen* left its girl passengers and two men here. They have been making the night spots and having a fine time." He grinned at Spud, who was leaning forward, an eager light in his eye.

"Have your men contacted them?" Kent asked.

"Yes, and they seem to be just tourists. After dinner I'll take you to a spot where you can look them over." Breed settled down to his dinner, but Spud had questions to ask. The

major described the girls, a redhead, two brunettes, and a blonde.

When they had finished dinner, Major Breed drove them to a dance pavilion that specialized in West Indian music and dancing. They took a table and settled down to cool drinks. The *Sea Queen's* former guests had not arrived.

An hour later the party came into the pavilion. They were all there, the four girls and two men. Kent studied the men. They were dressed in tropical clothing and they were young. The party was hilarious from the start. Kent had a feeling nothing would come of questioning them. The girls laughed and giggled and danced with the two men. Then Kent noticed that the redheaded girl was watching Major Breed, who was in uniform. He kept an eye on her.

Spud finally walked over and sat down a table away from the blonde. In a few minutes he was talking to her and she had moved over to his table. She and the redhead were not dancing so regularly as the other two girls. The redhead glanced toward Kent and the major. She got up from her table and walked to another well away from Spud and the blonde.

"You could saunter over and get acquainted," Major Breed said.

Kent nodded. He got to his feet and walked over to the table.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"Be glad to have you do so." The redhead had an accent that eluded Kent. He sat down and smiled at the girl.

"I'm Kent Barstow," he said. He watched her expression, trying to see if the name meant anything to her. Her eyes were watchful but her lips smiled.

"I am Sherry Conrad," she said.

"When did you arrive?" Kent asked.

"I live here," she answered. "And you are from the States?"

"Yes," Kent said. He had a feeling the girl was lying to him.

"You don't like to dance, I don't like to dance." Her smile widened. "So we can sit here and talk."

"I'm a bad dancer," Kent admitted. His eyes were on Spud, who was swinging across the dance floor with the blonde.

"You are a friend of the handsome major?" Sherry asked innocently.

"Yes," Kent answered, then took a chance. "You go on many cruises?"

"Everyone here goes on cruises and eats huge fruit salads." She cocked her head on one side. "I have one ordered. You should have one."

"Sounds good," Kent said. "I'll order one." He gave a signal to a waiter.

Kent sat looking at the girl. She wasn't much of a talker. He decided to take the direct way.

"You been cruising some on the *Sea Queen*?"

The girl looked around quickly, then leaned forward. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm interested in the *Sea Queen*."

"Interested in what?" She had lowered her voice.

"The boat, the crew."

"The *Sea Queen* is nice, very nice. I had much fun on the cruise." She did not smile when she said it.

"And the crew?" Kent pressed her.

"They never mixed with the guests. In port they went ashore. Only those who served stayed aboard." Then she added brightly, "But that is the way with crews, isn't it?"

"They didn't act like the usual pleasure-craft crew?"

"They were quite grim fellows."

The two salads arrived, heaping platters of tropical fruit. Sherry gave her attention to the salad, looking up at Kent occasionally. Kent ate and turned over in his mind what the girl had said.

"They had the usual equipment aboard?" he finally asked.

"I think so. I saw everything except what was in one cabin. It was always locked." She gave Kent a clear-eyed look. "But I do not like to talk about that boat here where someone might hear."

Kent smiled. This looked like the same deal Spud had gotten into in Cocoa. The best way to find out was to go along with the girl.

"Is there any place where we could talk?" he asked.

"There are secluded spots on the grounds." She smiled at him.

They finished the salads. Sherry got up. She tucked her handbag under her arm and started for an exit. Kent went along with her. He did not glance at Breed, but he knew the major was watching him and would be likely to follow at a discreet distance.

The girl led Kent out into the shadowy grounds. Once or twice she glanced back. They came to a hedge and Sherry turned right, passed through a narrow opening in the shrubbery, then turned left, passing into black shadows. She tightened her fingers on Kent's arm.

"I do this to confuse anyone following us," she said in a low voice.

Kent had a feeling she was an expert at this sort of thing. He doubted if Breed could stay on the trail. They walked down a path and turned off into a small clearing where the

light was better. Kent saw a bench close to a big tree. Sherry steered him to it and sat down. She patted the bench beside her.

"Sit down. We will talk."

Kent glanced at the tree. If he sat where she indicated, his back would be open to anyone behind the tree. On the other side the wide trunk would protect him. He turned and started to move past the girl. His senses were as alert as when he had taken his first training. He caught a faint sound back of him and on his right but he did not calculate how close it was.

There was a sudden sharp pressure at his back. He did not have to be told that someone was standing there with a knife blade thrust against his spine. Sherry jumped to her feet and stood facing him.

A voice behind him said, "I must search you, señor."

Kent had no orders on him but he wanted very much to get his hands on the man who held the knife.

"I have no orders or official papers," he said.

"Search him," the voice ordered harshly. "If he makes a move, we will search a corpse."

Kent raised his hands from his sides. He felt the girl's fingers start searching. Easing his hip to the left, he tensed, then shot the hip backward. His blow turned his assailant aside and the knife pressure was gone. Kent pivoted and his open hand came down. It missed the knife hand, but he had leaped forward before the upward thrust found his side. His left hand sent the girl spinning away from him.

In less than ten seconds he had cleared himself and was facing his assailant, who was taller and broader than Kent. He could have run for it, but he wanted very much to capture the man. He was sorry he hadn't worn his gun. The thing to do was to alert Breed and keep the fellow from escaping.

The big man did not seem to have escape in mind. He started toward Kent with the knife turned so that its point aimed at Kent's chest. If he was a knife thrower, this was bad. The hand whipped back and opened. The knife lay in the palm.

"Drop that knife!" Kent shouted. He was aware that the girl had vanished.

A guttural snarl came from the man and the arm started to move. This was a critical second in timing for Kent. If he misjudged it, he'd get a knife in his chest. The arm started forward and Kent leaped aside. The knife slashed past him, cutting through his coat sleeve. Kent pivoted and lunged, head down, at the man.

He hit his assailant like a blocking back taking out the interference, and they went down in a lashing heap of flailing arms and kicking legs. This was Kent's kind of fight, but the big man was tough and strong. He rolled over and was on top of Kent. His hands reached for a throat hold. Kent brought one free knee up. The hands missed and Kent smashed both hands to the man's face. The man grunted as his head snapped back. Then he lashed at Kent's neck with the edge of an open hand. Kent felt the impact and knew the judo blow would blank out his senses. He tried to raise his arms to ward off another blow but he could not lift them. The blow fell, and Kent blacked out.

Kent opened his eyes to find Major Breed's face close above his. The major was massaging his neck and shoulders. Kent took an experimental breath. When he tried to talk, the words came out as a grating croak.

"He got away?"

"Both he and the girl got away. How come an expert like you walked into a trap?"

"Calculated risk," Kent croaked.

"They're sure desperate for information," Major Breed said grimly.

Kent shoved himself to a sitting posture. "Wonder if they worked on Spud."

"When you can walk, we'll go see."

Kent tried to get to his feet. He made it to the bench and sat there twisting his head to clear it. Ten minutes later they started back to the pavilion, with Major Breed steadying Kent.

When they walked into the pavilion they saw Spud seated at a table with the blonde. They had ordered food and were eating. The other two couples were dancing.

"I guess you picked the right one," the major said.

They crossed the floor and stopped beside Spud's table. Spud stared open-mouthed at Kent. Kent's suit was rumpled and one sleeve was slashed. The blonde stared, too.

"What happened to you?" Spud demanded.

"I was taken for a ride," Kent answered.

"I'm taking Barstow to his room," Major Breed said. "I suggest you avoid secluded nooks."

Spud flushed and looked at the blonde. She was still staring at Kent. "You had a fight?" she asked.

"Sort of," Kent said.

"I sort of planned on seeing Carmen home," Spud said hesitatingly.

"You don't have to," the blonde said promptly, "I don't like brawls. My friends can take me home." Her manner had suddenly become icy.

"Well," Spud said, "I ought to go with Kent." He fished into his pocket and laid a bill on the table.

"Good night," the blonde said coldly.

They moved across the floor. Spud shook his head sadly. "It always happens to me," he said. "Who jumped you?"

"I let the redhead get me outside and some bruiser with a knife tried to search me," Kent answered.

"That means they don't have all the dope they want," Spud said quickly.

"It means they are desperate and tough," Kent answered.

"We staying to run them down?" Spud asked.

"We're taking off for Ascension in the morning. Major Breed can handle things here." Kent moved his neck and decided he wasn't in such bad shape, but he felt angry. The enemy was getting away with too much.

CHAPTER 13

Long Hop

THE flight to Ascension would be made with a fuel stop at the St. Lucia base.

This sort of flight was routine for Kent and Spud. Both had flown long-range jets on similar flights. But because of the distance they were at Operations by four o'clock in the morning. A sleepy ground crew was busy out on the apron. The only wide-awake men about were the security guards. They patrolled the flight line, and one had been stationed at the F-101 during her stopover. Kent had no sabotage worries with these men on guard.

The take-off went smoothly, with the F-101 climbing fast. The peaks of La Belona and Pico Trujillo, rising well above ten thousand feet, dropped away and there was only the flat expanse of the Atlantic below.

"Peaceful, eh?" Spud called to Kent.

"We're nice and safe up here," Kent called back.

The F-101 knifed ahead and up. Kent intended to fly the

jet well above thirty thousand feet where she would function best as to handling and fuel consumption. Up there was nothing but the cold sky around them. Through the windscreen they could see below them only a pattern which was the earth.

The six hundred miles to St. Lucia slipped behind them. They sighted the island after Kent had dropped down to ten thousand feet. They swept over the beautiful harbor of Castries surrounded by hotels and homes. St. Lucia AAFB was at the eastern tip of the island. Kent got his clearance and landing instructions and came in over the base. He made a proper approach and set the F-101 down.

The usual jeep was waiting, with an Intelligence man at the wheel. This one was Lieutenant McCready. He grinned broadly as the boys climbed out of the F-101.

"Heard you were flying a Voodoo," he greeted them.

"I'll take that Voodoo any time," Spud said. "She gets you there."

"I'll run you in for coffee and eats while the boys go over your ship," McCready said.

They rode in to the base. It was clear that St. Lucia was a beautiful island. It was green, and forests grew in masses, with fields and grassland between.

"Get many strangers here?" Kent asked.

"Not at the base. Plenty of people stop at the hotels and resorts." He smiled frankly at Kent. "We can't check them all. We only check when we're alerted."

"Been alerted on a pleasure cruiser named *Sea Queen*?" Kent asked.

"Yes, but she did not put in here."

"Has she been sighted?"

"No one has sighted her and reported. No one has picked up any signals from her," McCready said.

The boys had coffee and sweet rolls in the base coffee shop. Kent grinned as he mounted a stool. St. Lucia, Kadena on the other side of the world, every AF coffee shop was the same, a bit of the USA transplanted in a foreign land.

Lieutenant McCready had been alerted about the *Sea Queen*, but he had little information on what was really going on. Kent didn't have much to pass along. He talked freely only to men Jefferys contacted for him. It was up to the colonel.

After they had eaten, McCready drove them out to Operations, and Kent checked in. He would need to refuel air-to-air in order to make the three-thousand-mile flight. He shoved his orders across a counter to a captain. The captain looked at Kent curiously, then at Spud.

"Your F-101 has been cleared for a refueling at twenty thousand feet." The captain looked at his chart. "You'll make contact at fifteen hundred miles." It was clear that the captain was curious as to why the Air Force was going to the trouble of refueling an F-101, for that matter why the F-101 was going to Ascension. But he knew that Kent and Spud were Intelligence men. Intelligence men did strange things. "You are Eagle Red," the captain said. "Tanker is a Super Sabre. She is Eagle Blue. Probe and Drogue operation."

"Fine," Kent said. "We want to clear as soon as we can. I figure three hours' flight time."

"That's the way you're rated," the captain said doubtfully.

"We may shave some off that," Kent said, just for the benefit of the captain.

McCready drove them to the flight line. Spud sniffed the air approvingly and looked off toward a cluster of houses.

"Have any fun here?" he asked.

"Plenty going on in Castries—that's the capital," McCready said.

The F-101 was ready when they arrived. The boys said good-bye to McCready and climbed in. Kent eased down into his seat.

Before he put on his helmet and oxygen mask he said to Spud, "Want to take her out on the first leg?"

"Sure do," Spud said. "I've been itching to try this baby out."

Spud taxied out to the end of the runway and swung around. When he was cleared, he sent the Voodoo down the runway, kicking in her afterburner and lifting her screaming into the sky in a roaring climb.

Kent grinned. Spud flew a jet just the same way he drove a car. Finally Kent called to Spud, "We're on fuel ration."

Spud reluctantly eased off, but he still kept the speed up. Kent decided he would keep still. It wasn't likely that Spud would get them into a tight spot. Later he would crack down and make Spud think about the fuel supply.

They drilled along for an hour, then another. Kent looked at the fuel gauges and frowned. He flipped his intercom.

"Check your fuel, wild man," he said sharply.

He got a grunt from Spud, but the speed eased down to a fuel-saving pace. Another fifteen minutes passed and Kent switched his radio to the wave length of the Super Sabre. She should be knifing along within several hundred miles. He kept the channel open, and waited. A glance at the fuel gauges showed that they were going to have to sweat because of Spud's eagerness.

They roared on, and Spud started squinting at the fuel gauges. Finally he cut in on Kent.

“Where’s that Super Sabre?”

“Nothing so far,” Kent answered.

Spud was nursing the F-101 now. He was hunched down in his seat as though trying to help the ship along. Kent did not smile. They had to have fuel before long. He did not relish a crash landing in the middle of nowhere. The F-101 was not built for an emergency landing at sea.

“I’m pretty dumb at times,” Spud muttered over the intercom.

Kent didn’t answer. It was his fault for letting Spud waste gas. He was the aircraft commander and should have cracked down sooner.

“Looks like we’re going to get wet,” Spud said sourly.

“Keep on flying and keep her up where she takes it easy,” Kent called back grimly. He gave his attention to the tanker’s channel.

“Aren’t you going to try to contact them?” Spud demanded.

Kent cut back to the outside channel. “Eagle Red calling Eagle Blue. Do you read me?” He waited, then repeated the call, and waited again.

A voice came in faintly. “Reading you five square, Eagle Red. Twenty-six. Revised ETA.” That meant estimated time of arrival was twenty-six minutes past the hour.

Spud had been listening in. He bent forward. Twenty-six minutes. He just could not keep the F-101 flying that long. Kent had also checked the gauges. He was now acting as navigator and had made his fix on instruments to give his location to the Super Sabre. He started calling and checking

to make sure all headings were correct. A miss would mean the end for the Voodoo.

"Eagle Blue. We are low on fuel. Can you cut contact time?"

"Will do, Eagle Red," came back the reply.

Twenty minutes later Kent contacted the tanker again. The Super Sabre had increased her speed three hundred and fifty knots. Spud had let the F-101 settle down well below the thirty-thousand-foot level.

"Sure wish she'd show," Spud muttered.

The F-101 did not take to the atmosphere below twenty-five thousand feet. Spud had to fight the controls constantly. They were in rough air with pressures uncertain. The fuel needles tapped the empty peg and bounced as Kent glanced at them. Spud was grimly attending to business. Kent had a powerful impulse to take over the controls, but he did nothing about it. To take over now would be a blow to Spud's self-respect.

Kent checked his gear and the crash gear close to him. There was only one comforting thought. If they ditched, the tanker could pinpoint their location for rescue craft. But at best rescue probably could not reach them until the next day.

The Super Sabre's navigator came on. "Eagle Red. Eagle Red."

"This is Eagle Red. Go ahead."

"We figured twelve miles. Stabilizing at six hundred knots for contact."

"Have you square. Six hundred knots for contact," Spud cut in.

The Super Sabre came in fast. There would be no actual contact such as is made in refueling from a KC-97 or a

KC-135. This was Probe and Drogue, as it is called in the USAF. Kent handled the receiving probe as the Super Sabre maneuvered into position and extended her line.

Now that the pressure was off, Spud flew the Voodoo easily. This was a routine matter now that they had gas pouring into their tanks. Kent relaxed and handled his part of the refueling. Then, suddenly, the Super Sabre lifted and broke contact. She zoomed up and over, flashing from sight. Spud hit the throttles, and the F-101 knifed upward, gaining speed rapidly.

Kent called to Spud, "I'll take her on in."

"Rog," Spud answered. He tried to keep the relief out of his voice.

Kent took over and set his pace at a fuel-saving speed. He relaxed as the F-101 smoothed out in the thin air thirty thousand feet above the ocean.

An hour slipped by, with Ascension AAFB getting closer. Kent gave some thought to his mission. So far he had no idea what he could do when they reached Ascension. Make a sea search for the *Sea Queen*, of course, but if he located the cruiser, what could he do? She hadn't violated any international law. She could be warned to get out of dangerous waters, but she wouldn't have to obey. She was on the high seas.

Then he spotted Ascension Island. He knew he was close or he would not be able to see the six-by-seven-mile island. He contacted base control and identified himself.

"Had you on the scope for some time," a voice said. "You're way ahead of schedule."

"Thanks to a real fast jet jockey," Kent answered.

He got his landing instructions and let down below the twenty thousand feet he had already reached. Ascension AAFB is on

the southwest corner of the island. He roared over the base and set the F-101 down.

The base jeep driven by a lieutenant met them as they piled out. Lieutenant Ralston did not regard the F-101 as a joke. Any jet under the bomber class that made the flight to Ascension was a mighty good ship in his estimation.

Ralston did not know the details of Kent's mission, but he did know that Kent was to have a free hand and be entrusted with some very secret information.

After they had made introductions and the boys had tossed their bags into the jeep, he said, "I'll run you over to the barracks. After dinner tonight you'll meet Major Adkins, who will brief you."

"How many inhabitants are there on the island?" Kent asked.

"One hundred and seventy. Mostly cattle and sheep growers on Green Mountain. Only place there's any vegetation."

Kent asked no more questions. Ralston drove them to Officers' Quarters and they went to their room, eager for a shower and a change of clothing.

CHAPTER 14

The Beast

MAJOR ADKINS was a tall, spare man. He looked more like a college professor than a military man. Kent learned later that the major had a Ph.D. degree and could rightly be addressed as Dr. Adkins. He supervised and directed all matters concerned with the target area and the recovery of the Atlas nose cone.

Major Adkins arose from his seat back of a large desk when Kent and Spud entered his office. He shook hands with the boys smilingly.

"I have heard much about you and your work on The Monster."

"I worked on that project," Kent admitted.

"When we get around to sending a man to the moon or Mars we'll be calling on you. Have a seat." Major Adkins nodded toward two chairs, one at each end of his desk. The boys sat down.

Kent had a feeling that at last he had met a man who could

furnish complete information on the missile program and especially on the Atlas.

"I'm curious about The Beast," he said.

"The production of an intercontinental missile is a complicated job. Our Ballistic Missile Division has enrolled industrial contractors who have over forty-three thousand people employed on missile work. Those are aside from the Air Force personnel."

Spud whistled softly. Kent nodded thoughtfully.

"The Atlas itself is a complicated combination of instruments and hardware. If you feel that it would help your mission to know something about the project and the firing, I'll be glad to go over the project briefly." Major Adkins tapped a pencil on the top of his desk.

"I'd like to hear what you care to tell," Kent answered.

"Me, too," Spud said.

"Well, to begin with, we have ten thousand men at base and along the range who have a part in making a shoot."

Kent grinned. All those men, and Jefferys had sent him and Spud out to find something the experts had overlooked. But of course those men were technicians and probably not interested in enemy agents.

"The important things about the Atlas are that it can be aimed at a target six thousand miles away and that a hit can be scored. This is all possible because the structure of the metal in the nose cone resists the high temperature encountered when the cone passes back through the earth's atmosphere." Major Adkins traced a doodle on a pad.

"Jefferys explained that much. He's worried for fear a foreign agent might recover the nose cone." Kent smiled at the major.

"I did not share his concern at first, but after learning about your experiences I feel that we should take added precautions," Major Adkins said.

"How about this operation, the firing and recovery of the cone?" Kent asked.

"You have boats out close to the target area, haven't you?" Spud asked.

"Yes, but for safety's sake they are not on the exact spot," Major Adkins said. "As to the firing, the operation considers safety, instrumentation, and gathering of data."

Major Adkins leaned back before going on. He seemed to be considering how much he should disclose. "Safety has to do with range clearance and safety in flight. Crash boats patrol the Canaveral area to warn small craft. The down-range area must be cleared of ships. There is a five-mile danger zone around the cape."

"How about the in-flight safety?" Spud asked.

"During flight, safety responsibility rests with the safety control officer who is able to see the missile with the aid of radar and plotting board. He can destroy it if that seems necessary." Major Adkins smiled at Spud.

"Practically foolproof?" Spud said.

"Almost. We did have one runaway missile that headed for South America and disappeared."

"What about the safety features here at the landing site?" Kent asked.

"We have many instruments for sighting the missile and for tracking it to point of impact. When this point is determined, boats close in. We also have air coverage by planes."

"Just how accurate is your shooting so far?" Kent asked. "Could you forecast the spot where the cone will land?"

"The guidance mechanism has been perfected so that we have only a small area off target," Major Adkins answered. "After launching, the Atlas can be guided only during the first part of its flight, since gravity is the only external force exerted upon it after its rocket motors are expended. To hit a target at such great ranges requires that very precise measurements be made of the position and velocity of the Atlas during its powered flight. Since the guided portion of the flight is farthest from the target, the guidance system must be accurate. An error of a degree at launch can mean an error of many miles at target. Remember the Atlas travels at a speed of fifteen thousand miles per hour. That makes guiding it a ticklish job."

Kent nodded. He knew the problem of guiding an aircraft flying at only fifteen hundred miles per hour. "So you don't crowd in on the target spot very close?" he said thoughtfully.

"No," Major Adkins admitted. "The mathematical chance of being hit is small, but we do not take chances."

"I'll have to drop around for a shoot," Kent said.

"Never dreamed there was so much to it," Spud admitted.

"It is a complex and highly scientific operation," Major Adkins said.

"And because so many are concerned with it many people would know about the shoot, possibly the time?" Kent asked.

"That's right, but not the target area," the major answered.

"Could be a leak there, too," Kent said. "There was a leak right in Jefferys' office when I went out to the Far East to fly The Monster."

"That is possible," Major Adkins said. "And the shoot date and hour have been set. I am to give the time to you by word of mouth."

"I don't think they have it, or at any rate they did not have

it when we stopped at St. Lucia. Someone thought I had written orders." Kent grinned.

"In that case they probably do not have the information," Major Adkins said.

"How about security here?" Kent asked.

"It isn't as tight as at Canaveral. Most of the valuable data is collected by the tracking stations along the down range. That is fed into offices at the missile center and processed." The major smiled at Kent. "We have never thought about a foreign agent trying to steal a nose cone."

"Could the nose cone be hoisted aboard a big, fast pleasure cruiser?" Kent asked.

"I doubt it. It might be towed away by such a craft," the major said, after some thought. "You refer to the *Sea Queen* we have been alerted to watch for?"

"Yes," Kent answered. "Still don't see how she could fit into their scheme, but I'm sure she does."

Major Adkins gave the boys the date and hour of the shoot as the last item in their briefing. He also showed them the target area on a chart. Kent memorized the exact point so that he could later use the information for navigation. The major also indicated the position of ships at sea and the pattern of the air patrols. Kent noticed that the plan called for a large cleared area. Surface boats would take some time in reaching the center of the target circle. Air spotters could be there very shortly.

"You and Murphy are free-lancing but you must check with Operations at all times." The major turned away from the wall charts, and the boys knew that the briefing was over.

"Thank you, sir," Kent said.

"Good luck," Major Adkins answered. Before they were out

of the room he was talking over the phone about technical details connected with the coming shoot. Spud grinned at Kent as the door closed.

"He takes our mission very lightly," he said.

"He's a scientist, not a gumshoe," Kent answered.

"Where do we go from here?" Spud asked.

"We poke around." Kent walked slowly down the hall. They had a look at the compact rooms that made up Major Adkins' headquarters. There were a few offices, but mainly the rooms housed instruments and equipment for tracking the missiles. The control boards and the machinery were all foreign to Kent. What he was interested in was the fact that he did not spot a single guard or any airman who looked like an Intelligence man. He reminded himself that Intelligence made it a rule to send out men who did not look the part.

"No guards," Spud said as they stepped outside.

"Nothing to guard," Kent answered.

"Wonder if they know the time and the target area?" Spud mused.

"Probably the time but not the target area. They don't have to know. Their detectors will tell them."

They were well away from any listening ears. Spud said, "We've got forty hours to uncover and unmask the varmints."

"Plenty of time," Kent said cheerfully.

Spud looked at him sharply. "You got ideas?"

"I got some hunches," Kent answered. "But I'm not saying anything that might later make me look silly."

Spud laughed. "I don't even have a hunch. Let's warm up the Voodoo and comb the broad ocean for the *Sea Queen*."

"Better men than you and I have been doing that for several days," Kent answered.

"So we just sit and look dumb."

"We'll go out to Operations and see if they've got a light plane. I'd like to see the goats on Green Mountain."

"Goats?"

"I hear they have wild goats and bighorn sheep on that mountain. We'll drop in on Lieutenant Ralston and see if we can borrow a jeep," Kent said.

"Can't see what they could hide on a mountain that would do them any good," Spud argued. "Matter of fact, we're just putting in our time."

Lieutenant Ralston wasn't in his office, but there was a tech sergeant who had been told to look after their wants.

"Sure, sir, I'll get you a jeep," the sergeant said. "I know a corporal who's too lazy to walk. I'll requisition his jeep. That'll give him some exercise."

"Any light pleasure planes here?" Kent asked.

"Yes, sir. The Aero Club has three. See Captain Greer at Operations." The sergeant started dialing a number. After talking a few minutes he smiled at Kent and Spud. "Such language," he said, and his smile widened into a grin. "Your jeep will be right over. The corporal may strip the gears getting it here, but he'll show up."

"Thanks, Sergeant," Kent said.

When the corporal arrived with the jeep it was readily understood why he preferred to ride instead of walking. He was short and very plump, well on the way to becoming fat. He got out of the jeep and saluted without much snap.

"Thank you, Corporal," Spud said.

The corporal headed toward Lieutenant Ralston's office with fire in his eye. The boys got into the jeep with Spud at the wheel.

They had no trouble locating Captain Greer. He was reading a magazine in the outer office at Operations. Yes, they had light planes. What did Kent want with one?

"We just wanted to scout the island," Kent answered.

"You fellows flew that F-101 in, didn't you?" the captain asked.

"We did," Spud said with a grin.

"We have orders to go along with you," the captain said. "Ever fly a helicopter?"

"Yes," Kent answered.

"We have a two-place Hiller here that makes an excellent scout ship. Spot a bathing beauty on the beach, you can go right down and land." He grinned at the boys. He had taken some papers from a drawer and was looking at them.

"How about staying out a bit after dark?" Kent asked.

"Be okay," Captain Greer said. He glanced at the papers he had taken from the drawer. "Someone seems to have handed you the key to this island."

"We have a pull," Spud said gravely. "We know certain people."

The captain smiled. "You Intelligence birds always duck around under phony orders and names and jobs."

"Where'll we find this Hiller?" Kent asked.

"I'll have a crew get it out for you," the captain said.

CHAPTER 15

Signal at Night

THE HILLER was a trim little craft built by a West Coast manufacturer. The ground-crew chief briefed Kent and Spud on the machine.

As he stepped back from it he said, "Just about flies itself."

Kent and Spud climbed aboard. Kent checked the controls to make sure he knew what to do. They were simple and easily understood. The boys waved to the ground crew, and Kent started the engine. After a minute of warmup they were off. The Hiller rose gracefully and swooped away toward Green Mountain, which rose twenty-eight hundred feet above the western end of the island.

They zoomed in close to the slope, taking altitude as they went. They could see trees and underbrush, with open meadows scattered between. There were many cattle, and on the rocky ground near the summit they spotted sheep and goats.

After they had been up an hour Spud began to tire of looking down on the peaceful scene below. Occasionally flock tenders

paused to watch the Hiller as it swept over a clearing, but there was no other activity. Spud looked at his watch.

“How’s for heading back and eating?” he shouted.

Kent nodded. He swung the Hiller around and made a wide, sweeping circle over the ocean, then swept back along the beach. On the lee shore great rollers crashed in. There were many steep ravines formed by masses of lava. These ended in small bays. There seemed to be many caves on the rocky slope above the turbulent shoreline. Kent eased the Hiller around a point and headed for the landing strip where they would park.

Spud grinned broadly. “I like this bird!” he shouted. “Noisy, but you can set her down in a back yard.”

They came in, and two men drove over to take over the helicopter. Kent and Spud got out. Kent spoke to the corporal, who seemed to be in charge.

“We’ll do a bit of late flying tonight, Corporal.”

“Yes, sir. How late?”

“An hour or two after dark, possibly more. If we’re late, will we need to have a crew?”

“No, just land the ship on this apron. It will be lighted.” The corporal pointed to a floodlight. “If you come in from this side”—he waved an arm—“you won’t even need to clear with the tower. This is far off the flight line.”

“Thanks,” Kent said. He and Spud walked to where they had left the jeep.

“What do you expect to see at night?” Spud demanded. “We didn’t see anything by daylight.”

“Be nice flying around at night,” Kent answered.

Spud grunted. “More of your wooly hunches?”

“Could be.”

The boys had an early dinner, then returned to their room.

They had VIP quarters, a small main room with two bedrooms curtained off, and a shower.

"The only real fun I've had on this trip was when I was sweating it out in the Voodoo waiting for our tanker." Spud was slumped down in an easy chair with his feet on a low table.

Kent stood looking out through a window. "How about the trip down the Indian River?"

"No real excitement there," Spud answered.

"We could have bumped into an alligator."

"We didn't." Spud got to his feet and joined Kent at the window. Darkness had begun to settle. "We may as well get on with the night patrol."

They turned away from the window. Kent looked down at his open bag. His service revolver lay on top of a stack of shirts. No need to pack it along. He turned toward the door. Spud got to it first.

"I get to fly the chopper," Spud said.

"No stunts," Kent warned.

They got into the jeep and rode out to the apron where the Hiller was parked. The area was lighted by one floodlight. They were getting out of the jeep when two airmen appeared. They had been sitting in the shadows cast by a wall. The taller of the two saluted and his partner made a lazy attempt.

"Taking off, sir?" the tall youth asked.

"Yes, Corporal," Kent answered.

"No night flights due in tonight, but the approaches are lighted." The corporal moved close to the Hiller, but he did not check anything.

"We'll stay away from the approach lanes," Kent answered.

The boys climbed into the Hiller, and Spud started the engine. He revved it up and took off with a rush, then swept low

over the apron, heading toward Green Mountain. About the only thrill he could get out of flying the Hiller was to swoop low over the first trees they came to. The branches waved wildly as the down blast struck them.

“Too dark for low flying!” Kent shouted. “You’ll snag the top of a tree.”

Spud took fifty feet more altitude. They swept up the dark slope. A few lights winked below, marking the location of huts or open fires. Men could be clearly seen squatting around one of the fires.

After reaching the summit Spud made a circle. Suddenly Kent reached over and gripped Spud’s arm. He pointed out to sea. Spud swung the Hiller around a quarter turn. Far out on the dark ocean a light was flashing. Kent knew Morse code, but he could not read the signal. Spud leaned close to him and shouted.

“Shall we drift out there for a look?”

“Circle the slope below. We may spot the receiver of that signal.”

Spud circled down the slope. The signals from the sea had stopped coming. As they passed over a deep ravine, Kent saw a light. It moved a few yards, then vanished. He leaned close to Spud.

“I’ve got a fix on that ravine. Hustle out to sea for a look at the sender.”

Spud opened the ’copter engine’s throttle, and they swept low over the water. He circled and moved outward, but there was no sign of a boat. Kent had half hoped they’d spot the *Sea Queen*, though that wasn’t likely. There was light enough so that any boat, even an outboard small craft, should have

been visible. After forty minutes of searching Kent called to Spud.

"Take her back. If we can land, we'll have a look in that ravine."

Spud headed shoreward. He flew low and slow, looking for a bit of smooth ground. A quarter of a mile from the ravine he located a beach that seemed fairly smooth and level. The Hiller settled down gently. Spud cut the switch. The boys sat listening for a few minutes.

"I forgot my gun," Spud said.

"I thought about mine but decided it would just be a bother," Kent answered.

They got out of the helicopter and started over the rough lava surface. Here there was no vegetation, just rock that was cutting sharp. Kent moved ahead with Spud close on his heels.

The walls of the ravine were almost vertical, but by following the cleft toward the beach they were able to find a ledge that led to the bottom. The ravine was above water, but pools and dampness warned them that at high tide the water entered the ravine. They moved along cautiously.

Kent had a small flashlight which he played over the rock floor. Ahead, the narrow passage turned right. Rounding the turn, Kent flashed his light ahead. The mouth of a cave showed black and yawning. It opened some ten feet above the bed of the ravine, and a steep slope led up to it.

The boys moved up the slope and halted at the mouth of the cavern. The roof was some ten feet above and arched downward to a width of about twelve feet.

"Big hole," Spud muttered.

"We'll have a look inside," Kent said. He shot his light into

the cavern. It was swallowed by the blackness. No back wall was revealed.

They stepped into the blackness. Kent played the circle of light across the floor ahead of them. He had taken two steps when he felt hard metal jabbing into his back.

Two voices spoke almost in unison, "Get your hands up."

Kent was certain the object jabbing him in the back was a gun, but he wasn't too much worried. On such a small island Lieutenant Ralston's men would quickly rescue them once they did not return to base with the Hiller. But he lifted his hands slowly.

The cavern was suddenly flooded with white light. A third man had lighted a gasoline mantel lantern. Kent twisted around for a look at his captors. All three were roughly dressed and looked like natives. When they had spoken it was with a heavy accent.

"Start walking." The man behind Kent jabbed him hard.

The intense light from the lantern showed that the roof of the cavern lowered ahead of them and that there was a wall. As they approached the wall, Kent saw that the cavern turned right. They rounded the corner and came to a canvas draped across the passage, which had narrowed to five or six feet.

The man with the lantern pulled aside the canvas. The boys stood looking into a well-lighted cave. It was circular in shape, and in the center of the floor a table had been placed. Several folding stools stood close to the table. A short, dark-faced man in an airman's uniform sat on one of the stools facing the entrance. His rating stripe indicated an airman second class. He stared stonily at Kent and Spud as they were prodded toward the table. Kent gave him special attention. He meant to know the man when he saw him again.

"They were snooping around," the man with the lantern said.

"We make them come, Mister Hintz," the man back of Kent added.

"Good work, Luga." Hintz addressed himself to the man with the lantern.

"They don't try to get away from Kim and Gone Tom," Luga said with a big smile that changed his wrinkled face to something less vicious than it had been.

Kent decided to make his pitch. "This is foolish. You'll have a lot of explaining to do to Major Adkins."

Hintz laughed. "That schoolteacher. He knows nothing about running a base. You will be unharmed unless you try to get away. You won't be held long, perhaps two days."

"You won't get away with it," Spud said. "When the chopper fails to return this island will be combed inch by inch."

"Yes, the 'copter. I will return it and drive your jeep to a safe hiding place. It will be supposed you are off scouting the island, Lieutenant Barstow and Major Murphy." Hintz got to his feet.

"Lieutenant Ralston knows exactly what we are doing," Kent said sharply.

"I think not." Hintz moved around the table. "Sap them. It will make tying them up easier."

Luga lifted the lantern high. Before Kent could move a smashing blow landed on the back of his head. He was vaguely aware that he was falling forward, then blackness engulfed him.

CHAPTER 16

Captives

KENT opened his eyes slowly. He shook his head but the hammering inside it did not stop. White light from a lantern on a table stabbed at his eyeballs. He closed his eyes, then opened them slowly. He was sitting with his back to a stone wall. His ankles were securely tied and so were his wrists. The man called Gone Tom sat at the table. He was eating from a loaf of bread. Using a long-bladed knife, he cut chunks from the loaf and stuffed them into his mouth. Kent turned his head sidewise. Spud was propped up beside him, and he was still out cold.

Easing himself into a position that gave his back more support, Kent considered the fix he and Spud were in. His hands were tied in front, which was a slight advantage. With Gone Tom guarding him, there wasn't much he could do to work at his bonds. He still had his wrist watch. The time was ten fifteen. He figured he had been unconscious for perhaps a half-hour. Then he gave his attention to his guard. He wondered

how the hulking native had gotten the name Gone Tom. The man did not look intelligent, but he did look dangerous. Black hair grew low over a swarthy forehead, and a red scar marred one cheek. Time, Kent decided, was the important factor. Whatever the plot was it would be carried out when the shoot was made, and he had only a little more than a day to get loose and break it up.

Spud groaned and stirred. Gone Tom looked at Spud and scowled. Spud's eyes opened, and he shook his head, then began muttering. He beat his bound hands against his knees and jerked forward.

"Easy," Kent warned.

Spud turned his head toward Kent and seemed to see his partner.

"That thug sapped me," he muttered.

"Keep mouth shut," Gone Tom said in a guttural voice. He put down the knife and the loaf of bread, but he did not get up off the stool.

Spud glared at Gone Tom. "You the goon that slugged me?" he asked.

Gone Tom got to his feet and walked around the table. He planted himself in front of Spud. A heavy boot swung upward, catching Spud in the stomach. Spud bent double and groaned. Through clenched teeth he muttered savagely. Gone Tom turned and walked back to the table. He sat down and picked up the loaf of bread and the knife. After wiping dust from the loaf on a greasy sleeve, he started eating.

It was clear that Gone Tom wasn't going to allow any talking. Kent sat and stared at the big man. All he and Spud could do was to wait and hope for a break.

A half-hour passed. Spud recovered and sat silently glaring

at Gone Tom, who had eaten all of the bread. The sound of boots on the rock floor roused the big man. He stuck his knife into the table top and looked toward the canvas curtain.

The curtain was pushed aside and Hintz entered, followed by Luga and Kim. Hintz seemed to be in good spirits. Kent guessed that he had returned the Hiller and had hidden the jeep. Hintz sat down at the table and frowned when he looked at the litter of bread crumbs and the knife.

“Don’t you ever get enough to eat?” he said sourly to Gone Tom.

“No,” Gone Tom answered. “I go home. I bring two loaves of bread.”

Hintz turned to Luga, who had seated himself on a stool. “You are to be on your regular job tomorrow morning. Kim will be on the job with his herd. Every man will be checked. If you aren’t at work you’ll be checked.” He glanced at Gone Tom. “Gone Tom has no job, so no one will miss him.”

“I got to stay?” Gone Tom asked sourly. “I kill them, then I don’t watch them.”

“You kill them if they try to escape,” Hintz snapped. “No killing unless they give you trouble.”

Gone Tom’s teeth flashed white against his swarthy skin. Kent had an idea the man might be thinking of letting them try to escape.

“I’ll be at the airmen’s hut until it closes tonight. Just in case everyone is checked,” Hintz said.

“If they search, they will find this place.” Luga was staring at Kent and Spud.

“Before you leave, drag them up on the back shelf. Gag them and pile some rocks across the opening. Get rid of the table, stools, and the canvas.” Hintz got to his feet.

“What if they find Gone Tom here?” Luga asked.

“Gone Tom’s crazy. He’s always poking into caves and wandering around. That’s the way he keeps from doing any work. He gets a handout from the governor. Saves the old boy from having to lock him up and feed him.” Hintz laughed.

“That’s so. Everyone says he’s crazy,” Kim agreed. “I thought so, too, up until you let me in on his secret.”

“We’re taking the lantern,” Hintz said to Gone Tom. “No more light in here.”

“This place is not good in the dark,” Gone Tom said, and scowled at Hintz.

“Since when have you been afraid of the dark?” Hintz snapped.

Gone Tom shrugged his massive shoulders. “I have to go for food,” he said.

“Go get more bread,” Hintz said. “But get back here fast. They won’t be able to get away or make any noise, but I want you here.”

“I come right back.” Gone Tom started to shuffle away.

“Help Kim and Luga gag them and toss them on the shelf,” Hintz ordered.

“What we going to use for gags?” Luga asked.

“They probably have handkerchiefs.” Hintz turned and walked toward the entrance.

Kent and Spud said nothing. There was no point in bringing down Gone Tom’s wrath. Spud had already felt the man’s boot. But Kent wasn’t ready to give in or to admit defeat. He had been in tight places before. The greatest danger was in Gone Tom. The man might not be crazy, but he was a moron type. He might decide that he didn’t want to stay on guard. Killing Kent and Spud would be a simple solution to such a mind.

Luga came over and started searching Spud's pockets for a handkerchief. He found one and knotted it over Spud's mouth, forcing it between his teeth. He then did the same with Kent. Trussed and gagged, the boys waited for the next move. Luga stepped back.

"You guys take this one and heave him on the shelf." Luga pointed at Spud. He moved to the table and picked up the lantern. Gone Tom and Kim lifted Spud, one grabbing his feet, the other getting a hold under his arms. Luga walked ahead with the lantern. Kent noticed how easily Gone Tom lifted at least two thirds of the weight. He also noticed that Gone Tom was armed only with the long knife he used to cut the loaf of bread. The other men had revolvers thrust inside their belts.

Kent could not see the shelf where Spud was placed. It was an ell of the circular cave. The three men returned and Gone Tom and Kim picked Kent up and carried him into the ell of the cave. They heaved him up on a shelf that was five or six feet above the floor and sloped back into the rock wall no more than four feet. Spud had twisted around so that his head was toward the open side of the shelf. Kent rolled over and lay still.

The three men spent a half-hour piling rocks along the edge of the shelf so that anyone passing would miss the prisoners. Kent started working on his gag. It was almost impossible even to reach it with his hands because his captors had used an old trick. They had tied the wrist rope to the ankle rope, allowing just enough slack so that the prisoner could sit up.

Kent rolled over against Spud. He wanted Spud to use his hands if they were still able to move. Spud could remove Kent's gag if Kent lay with his head in Spud's lap. Spud lay on his side.

He was trying to see out between the rocks. He pushed Kent away from him. Kent twisted around and tried again. Spud pushed him away a second time. Kent gave up for the time being and pressed his face close to an opening between the rocks. He could see nothing, but sounds coming from the big room told him that the men were taking away the table and stools. He could still see light, so he knew they had not left.

After a while the sounds stopped and the light vanished. Kent listened for Gone Tom. He heard no sound and decided Gone Tom had left to get the loaves of bread he had spoken of. Kent started trying to make Spud understand what he wanted. He twisted around and managed to get his fingers on Spud's gag. The tightly drawn ropes around his wrists had cut off most of the circulation, and his hands were numb. He jerked feebly at the gag.

Spud understood. He turned over with his back to Kent. Kent squirmed upward and close to Spud. He could reach the knots in the handkerchief but wasn't sure he had strength enough to unfasten them. Luga had jerked the knots very tight. Patiently Kent picked and tugged. He rested between tries and flexed his hands, twisting the wrists so as to get some blood to his fingers.

Kent's first break came when he was twisting his wrists. One turn of the rope had been drawn over another. It twisted off, giving some freedom to the wrists. Kent eagerly opened and closed his hands. They began to regain their strength. He attacked Spud's gag, and now that his fingers had some strength he loosened the first knot, then the second. The gag slipped free.

Spud spat and sputtered, then he spoke, "Boy, am I glad to get that thing out of my mouth."

Kent turned over so that Spud could reach the knots in his gag. Spud twisted himself around.

"I just don't have any hands. They're both dead," he said. "But I'll get your gag off. I used to untie tough knots with my teeth when I was a kid."

Spud attacked the knots with his teeth. He twisted and jerked as he tried to discover which part to pull on. At last he jerked the first knot loose. Two minutes later he had the second undone and the gag pulled away from Kent's mouth.

Kent rolled over and sat up. He had to bend forward slightly because the roof was low. He wet his lips and took a deep breath.

"At least we can talk it over now," he said.

"How about trying to chew loose the ropes?" Spud asked.

"I have a pocketknife and my hands aren't dead," Kent said. "Trouble is I can't reach my side pocket."

"In a way they did a sloppy job on us," Spud said thoughtfully. "The gags weren't worth much to them."

"Think you could get at my knife?" Kent asked.

"I don't have any feeling in my hands," Spud answered. "But I can try."

The boys twisted and squirmed until Spud was in a position to reach Kent's pants pocket. He managed to get a hand into the pocket, but his fingers refused to close over the knife. He couldn't even feel it. After a half-hour of trying he had to give up.

Kent turned with his feet to the rock barrier the men had built. He shoved and sent a rock tumbling.

"You'll bring Gone Tom with that racket," Spud complained.

"I want to be able to see him when he comes," Kent answered.

"In this black hole?"

"I'm betting he'll have a light of some kind. I think he's spooky in the dark."

They heard Gone Tom when he returned, and he had a light with him. He stomped back to a spot below the shelf and sat down with his back to the far wall. He placed a candle carefully on the floor after dripping wax to make it stand upright. Kent looked out at him. He had two loaves of bread with him. He set them down on the floor, then looked up at the shelf.

Kent nudged Spud and whispered, "If he looks in we better have our backs turned."

But Gone Tom didn't check on the boys. He pulled his big knife out of his belt and started cutting chunks of bread. He ate steadily until one loaf was gone. After he had finished the loaf he stretched out on the hard floor. Reaching over, he snuffed out the candle with a thumb and finger.

"I'll try chewing the rope on your wrist," Spud whispered. He turned over and bent above Kent's bound wrists. After working awhile he said glumly, "I'm not getting on very fast." He spat out some strands of rope and went back to gnawing.

Time ticked away slowly. Down below Gone Tom kept on snoring. Kent began to have his first feeling of defeat. Spud leaned back wearily.

"At the rate I'm going it will take me a week to gnaw through the ropes."

"We don't have a week," Kent answered.

"I guess we have less than twenty-four hours." Spud leaned forward and started gnawing and pulling.

CHAPTER 17

Close Quarters

KENT and Spud did not sleep as the hours wore away. Spud gave up gnawing at the ropes binding Kent's wrists. The stiff fibers cut his tongue and lips. Kent kept flexing his hands at intervals. He wanted them in shape if he got a chance to use them.

Toward morning Kent got an idea. He lay on his side with the pocket containing his knife hanging down. Then he began twisting and turning, trying to get the knife to slide out of the pocket. Twice it slid forward and caught. Kent kept on twisting.

"What you trying to do?" Spud asked.

"Shake my knife loose."

Spud lapsed into silence. He had resigned himself to a long and painful stay on the rocky shelf. Kent went on twisting and jerking. He could get the knife to the opening where a seam stopped it from dropping out. He gave a hard jerk and a twist, then remained still. The knife had dropped out. He heard it click as it hit the rock.

"I got it," he whispered excitedly to Spud.

"Sure enough?" Spud asked unbelievably.

Kent started groping around for the knife. It had slid to the back wall and he had trouble reaching it. But at last he had it. Eagerly he felt for the big blade. The knife opened and Kent pressed against Spud, seeking his wrists. Spud held his arms out and waited.

The rope was made of hard, tough hemp. Kent's knife was good mainly as a manicuring instrument. It was dull, and the hemp resisted. Kent sawed away, severing a few strands at a time. Suddenly Spud whispered to him.

"Gone Tom's awake."

"You sure?"

"I heard him grunting." They listened and heard Gone Tom moving about, muttering to himself.

Kent went back to sawing. He was halfway through one rope. Spud leaned forward so that he could see through the hole where the rock had been kicked away. Gone Tom was on his feet. He had lighted the candle and was holding it high as he stared up at the shelf. Finally he knelt and shoved the candle into a crack.

Kent felt the knife blade cut through the last strand of rope. But Spud's wrists were not free. There was another rope and it, too, had been knotted. He felt of the knot and the rope. This time he'd have to be careful because Spud's wrists were swollen and the rope imbedded in the flesh. He started sawing. Spud winced.

"Be careful," he muttered. Then he leaned forward to watch Gone Tom. Gone Tom had sat down and started on his breakfast. He munched away for a while, then set the loaf on the floor and got to his feet. He ambled out of sight.

Spud laughed. "That dry bread got him. He had to go after a drink."

Kent sawed away. Spud squirmed as the knife nicked him.

He leaned forward again and looked out. "I think it's getting light," he said.

"How could any light get in here?" Kent asked impatiently.

"Might be a hole, sort of a skylight," Spud answered.

The rope began to part. Kent worked carefully, but Spud was impatient. He had decided he was going to get his hands free. He strained to break the last strands.

"Hold still," Kent said.

"Cut through. To heck with a few jabs," Spud said through gritted teeth.

Kent cut, and the rope strand parted. This time Spud's hands were free. Kent started massaging them. He worked fast, twisting and rubbing and pounding.

"They're beginning to hurt," Spud said.

"Can you cut me loose?" Kent asked.

Spud took the knife. His hands were stiff and clumsy, but he hacked away, and as he worked blood circulated in his hands and brought them back to life. He stopped hacking and started working on the knots.

"These don't seem so tight," he muttered. "I'll just untie them." He undid the first knot and tackled the second.

It was Kent's turn to watch the hole. He agreed with Spud that light was coming from someplace. Then he heard Gone Tom coming. The big man shuffled into view carrying a jug. He halted beside the candle and hoisted the jug over his arm. Kent licked his lips. The sound of gurgling water or wine reminded him that his mouth was very dry.

Spud unfastened the second knot and Kent's hands were

free. At once they attacked the ropes binding their ankles. Spud was better at solving knots than Kent. He got his legs free first. Kent jerked loose the last knot and leaned toward Spud.

“We’ll use this rope to tie up that gorilla,” he whispered.

“How we going to jump him?” Spud whispered. “We have to kick the rocks off the shelf to get out of here.”

“We’ll lure him in close and kick the rocks on him. We’ll be right there with the rocks as they fall.”

Spud eased himself around and placed his feet against the center of the row of rocks. They were big and heavy but the boys had the advantage of leverage.

“Wait,” Kent cautioned. He started scuffing his shoes against the shelf, then he kicked hard. As he did this, he looked down at Gone Tom. The big man had started eating again. He looked up at the shelf. Kent kicked a small rock loose. It bounced across the floor and hit the wall close to Gone Tom.

“You want me to kill you?” Gone Tom shouted. “You make some fuss I kill you.”

Kent kicked another rock off the shelf, then got his feet set to help Spud shove. The second rock bounced and hit Gone Tom below the kneecap. With a howl the big man lunged toward the shelf, brandishing his knife.

Spud and Kent heaved with all their strength. The rocks had been stacked loosely and with no thought of making the pile stable. A mass of big stones avalanched down upon Gone Tom. He was tall enough so that they hit him at his belt line. He staggered back as Kent and Spud leaped from the shelf. Kent hit the big man low, Spud went for the knife. Gone Tom was staggering backward and off balance, but he was a powerful man and an expert with a knife. Kent’s tackle hurled

Gone Tom against the rock wall. But Spud had missed the knife. It lashed out at his throat with a sidewise movement. Spud ducked his head aside and let the knife pass. He was well trained in such maneuvers. The instant the arm swept past, Spud seized it and lunged, intending to go under the arm and jerk it out of its socket. Unfortunately the wall was at Gone Tom's back. Spud's head collided with the wall. He slumped down, knocked unconscious.

Kent twisted free and tried frantically to locate the arm with the knife. The candle had been smashed by a falling rock. Fighting a powerful man armed with a knife in the dim light was a desperate thing to attempt. Kent knew he should run for it. But he also knew that Spud was lying unconscious on the floor, possibly fatally stabbed. He had felt Spud slump down.

The knife slashed out. Its point cut across Kent's jacket. He felt the burning sting of the steel that barely missed slashing deeply into his chest. Kent clutched wildly for the wrist that had to be back of that knife. He found it and hurled himself to the side, twisting with all his strength as he rolled over. A scream of pain from Gone Tom told him that he had scored. He had at least sprained the arm. Then Gone Tom was on him, battering with both fists. But the knife was gone, and that evened things.

Kent brought his knees up and twisted out from under the big man. He lashed with judo chops at the spot where he thought Gone Tom's neck must be. He missed, and the huge hands gripped him, sliding upward and closing on his throat. Kent twisted and turned and tore at those hands, but he could not free the man's grip. He knew he faced death.

Kent's senses were beginning to reel. Then, suddenly, he

was able to breathe and the smashing weight had left his chest. He turned over and pushed himself to a sitting position.

He heard Spud's voice, husky and hoarse. "You okay, Kent?"

"I'm okay." The words were little better than a croak. "What happened?"

"I was only out a few minutes. Grabbed me a slab of stone and used it. Our man is out cold."

"Killed?"

"No. Let's tie him up and get out of here." Spud moved close to Kent and reached down. He helped Kent to his feet.

Now that he was able to look around, he saw that there was some light. It came from an opening overhead. He realized that the light had allowed Spud to see what was happening.

"I'd have sworn it was dark when I mixed with that bird," Kent said.

"I think it got light fast," Spud said.

The boys hurried as they located the ropes on the shelf and bound Gone Tom's arms and legs. He came to as they were roping his ankles, and started to shout. Spud bent over him.

"Want us to kill you?" he asked harshly.

Gone Tom settled back and shut his mouth. Kent got to his feet and looked down upon the prostrate man.

"No use to question him. We got work to do."

"Yeah," Spud agreed.

They hurried through the big room and out to the ravine. They watched ahead, but they moved fast. They had both lost their hats, and their clothes were torn and dirt-stained. There was no talk until they were out of the ravine and up in a jumble of lava rock. Here they rested a few minutes.

"No telephones, no one we can bum a ride from," Kent said. "We hoof it to the base."

"Anyway, we can surprise Hintz and that Luga and Kim," Spud said grimly.

"I'm afraid the damage has been done. We get them but they're small fry. I think Hintz sent a message telling someone the time of the shoot and the target area." Kent got to his feet and started around the slope.

The island was only six miles wide. Kent figured they had five miles to walk. His watch was still running and told him the time was five o'clock.

"We should get in in an hour and a half," he said.

The going was rough around the mountain. They sighted herds of sheep and cattle but did not try to approach any of the herders. They were well around the slope and could see barren country ahead when they came to a meadow skirted by trees. Spud was about to step into the open when Kent jerked him back.

"What's up?" Spud asked. "All I see out there is a herder and some cows."

"That herder happens to be our friend, Kim," Kent answered.

Spud took a good look at the man seated on the ground close to the grazing herd. "It sure is good old Kim. Shall we take him?"

"No, let him think he's safe. We'll stay under cover and circle around him." Kent moved off through the trees.

They circled around the unsuspecting Kim and moved on. An hour later they reached the gate leading to the base. A sentry halted them. He stared at the two battered officers. Kent and Spud passed over their identification.

"You have had trouble, sir?" The sentry addressed Spud because of his rank.

"Nothing that needs attention. But we do want to get in touch with Lieutenant Ralston of Security at once," Kent said.

The sentry turned to Kent. "I can call for a jeep, sir."

"That will be fine," Kent said.

They waited inside the sentry house for the jeep. The sentry kept eying them speculatively. But they had called for the head of Security, so he did not feel he needed to call the officer of the day. The jeep arrived, but the driver did not know where to find Ralston at that hour.

"Take us to Officers' Barracks," Kent ordered. "We'll check from there by phone."

Ten minutes later they were in their room and Kent was on the phone. He caught Ralston just before he left for the Officers' Mess.

"I had started to worry about you two," Ralston said. "You returned the helicopter without checking in, and then took off in the jeep. I've had my men alerted."

"It's quite a story," Kent said. "We'll shower and get into some clean clothes, but it's urgent."

"I'll be right over. We'll have breakfast together," Ralston said, and hung up.

CHAPTER 18

Big Shoot

LIEUTENANT RALSTON arrived while Spud was in the shower. Kent was dressing. Ralston seated himself and frowned at Kent.

“Your boss has been calling every hour on the hour,” Ralston said sourly. “He is really hot and bothered.”

“He should be,” Kent answered. “And you will be when I get through telling you what happened to Captain Murphy and me last night.”

“I’m listening, but we better get through to Jefferys fast.”

Briefly, Kent told Ralston what had happened. The lieutenant listened and did not interrupt, but Kent could tell he was building up a head of steam. When Kent finished, Ralston got to his feet.

“Hintz is one of Major Adkins’ men. He brought him here from Canaveral.”

“He’s the one bad apple,” Kent said. “It only takes one if he’s close to the right people.”

"I'll have him picked up. He's probably over at Major Adkins' office right now." Ralston strode to the telephone. He snapped orders for a full two minutes. Hintz and his three coworkers would be picked up at once. He turned away from the telephone and faced Kent. "Before we eat you had better call Jefferys."

"What do you mean, before we eat?" Spud had come out of the shower room.

"You heard the lieutenant," Kent said.

Spud scowled, but he started dressing without further argument. Ralston was still steaming.

"I'm responsible for security. Adkins certifies a man to me. What do I do? I accept him." Ralston fumed.

"They look for a man with a clean record and no previous connections. They pick a man who is frustrated or feels he has been passed over or just a man who has a weakness for money," Kent said. "Hintz will check out as one of those."

"He'll talk," Ralston said grimly.

"I think not, but even if he does I doubt if it will do you much good. He probably knows very little. He had a job. He was to get the time of the shoot and the target area. His contact was probably one man, at most two." Kent settled his hat firmly on his head. He was glad he had packed an extra hat.

"They can call off the shoot, change the date and target area," Ralston said.

"That will probably be up to Jefferys. I have a hunch they'll go ahead as scheduled." Kent smiled.

"Just one of Kent's hunches," Spud said. "He has them every time he goes on a mission."

"They pay off once in a while," Kent said with a broad grin.

"That's a fact," Spud admitted. "Usually they're not hunches at all, just stuff he's figured out but won't tell anyone. That anyone is usually me." Spud looked at Kent. "Where'd you get that hat?"

"I brought an extra one."

Spud grinned broadly. "I hate to wear a hat. Orders are that I wear a hat. I have no hat so I don't wear one."

The boys and Ralston left the barracks and rode to Ralston's office. Major Adkins had received a report and had left orders that the lieutenant report to him. Ralston delayed reporting while Kent talked to Jefferys.

Jefferys was cold and sharp as he talked. He wanted to know what Kent had been doing and why he had not reported. Kent briefed him completely. When he finished talking, Jefferys was silent a few moments.

"Do you recommend calling the shoot off, Barstow?" he finally asked.

"No, sir," Kent answered. "We're alerted and should be able to recover that nose cone."

"You have some ideas?"

"Just a hunch," Kent answered. "Let Ralston and the recovery team go ahead as planned. Murphy and I will play my hunch, if you give us permission."

There was another silence, then Jefferys said, "Play your hunch, Barstow. Canaveral Security insists there can't be a slip-up. You may be the margin of safety we need." He chuckled. "I don't suppose you want to divulge your hunch?"

"No, sir," Kent answered. "It's a bit on the wild side."

"Good hunting," Jefferys said, and hung up.

Major Adkins insisted upon seeing Kent and Spud as well as Ralston. He said he would meet them at the Officers' Mess

when he learned they had not had breakfast. Before they left the office word came in that Hintz had been taken into custody and locked up.

Major Adkins was waiting for them when they reached the mess. They all sat at an isolated table. Spud was more interested in loading up his plate than in reporting. After they had their eggs, bacon, and toast before them, Adkins began talking.

"The shoot goes on tomorrow morning as scheduled." He looked at Kent. "Recovery plans will be strictly followed, and that includes you and your plane, Barstow."

"I suggest you check with Colonel Jefferys, sir," Kent answered. "I have permission to deviate from your plans."

"We are interested in safety," Major Adkins snapped.

"All safety measures will be observed," Kent assured him.

"You have talked with Colonel Jefferys?"

"I talked to him from Lieutenant Ralston's office," Kent said.

"Our patrols will be doubled. I do not want any interference," Major Adkins said sharply. He had changed from the professor type to the hard-officer type. Kent guessed that having Hintz fool him had angered the major.

They finished breakfast and Spud and Kent returned to the barracks. Both were tired, and there was nothing they needed to do. They lay down on their beds and were soon asleep.

Kent and Spud were up and ready to hear all of the details of the roundup from Ralston shortly after four o'clock that afternoon.

They found their jeep parked in front of the barracks and rode to Ralston's office. The lieutenant was in a good mood.

Kim, Luga, and Gone Tom had been captured. Two airmen had spotted the jeep cached in a grove of trees.

"How is Gone Tom?" Spud asked.

"He has a big lump on his head. What did you hit him with?" Ralston asked.

"A slab of lava rock," Spud answered.

Ralston turned to Kent. "I don't suppose you care to tell me what your plans are? I hear you're a lone-wolf operator."

"We're flying the F-101. I want to check some of the equipment aboard her tonight," Kent answered.

"Looking for the *Sea Queen*?" Ralston grinned broadly.

"Perhaps," Kent said.

"You needn't bother. She has been located at St. Helena. Her papers, everything, in order. She cleared for Havana this morning." Ralston fished a report from a pile and flipped it across his desk to Kent.

Kent smiled broadly. "Interesting" was his comment.

"Any of those fellows talk, the ones you rounded up?" Spud asked.

"Hintz refuses to talk. The other two talk but do not know anything. Hintz paid them to help him, no questions asked." Ralston frowned.

Kent and Spud left Ralston's office and visited Operations and the flight line. The recovery crew chief wasn't pleased over the prospect of having Kent and Spud flying. He had planes and ships all arranged in a pattern. But he had orders direct from the Pentagon to allow Kent to fly. He was a very young major who took his job seriously.

"You will follow all regulations. Your code call is Blue Duck. Stay in contact with us at all times. We want no air collision to foul things up." The major spoke crisply.

"We will follow all regulations as to flight," Kent promised.

They went to the flight line from Operations. A crew had been assigned to them. The crew chief said he was having the air-to-ground rockets checked and had given the Voodoo a complete inspection.

The boys went from the flight line to the Officers' Mess. After dinner they returned to barracks.

"We may as well get a night's sleep," Kent said.

"We have a jeep. We might scare up some fun," Spud argued.

"On an island with one hundred and seventy people, most of them sheep and cattle raisers?" Kent laughed.

"We could go over to the officers' rooms," Spud said.

"And answer a lot of questions." Kent started peeling off his jacket. "I'm hitting the sack."

Spud groaned, but he started getting ready for bed. Kent sat up and read a paperback book for several hours. Spud seldom read anything except required reports. He went to bed and was asleep in ten minutes.

Kent and Spud were up at four the next morning. The Atlas would leave the launching ramp at seven o'clock. At about seven thirty the nose cone would land on target if all went well. The boys had breakfast and drove to the flight line where they found much activity. Kent did not hurry his preparations.

"Brush up on your navigation," he said to Spud. "We have to be over the target when the cone lands."

"We could get clobbered," Spud said.

"We could," Kent agreed.

They went over the figures Major Adkins had given them. Both remembered them, and Spud started making out a chart.

At exactly six thirty Kent asked permission to take off. He

was cleared, and they boarded the F-101. With gear in order Kent taxied out to the flight line and spun the Voodoo around. Five minutes later they were up and out over the ocean. Ascension Island lay like a gray speck far to their west.

Kent did not take altitude, and he did not push the F-101. Spud checked his chart and set their course. They circled around and around in a sweeping arc after they reached the target area. Kent wanted to give the men at Canaveral a margin of several miles.

At seven fifteen they had covered a great deal of water but had seen nothing.

"Goose chase," Spud called to Kent.

"Nice calm sea," Kent agreed.

At seven twenty-five they saw the marker. They had not seen the cone descend, but Operations had told them it was on course and should make a close miss. Then they saw something else, and Kent banked steeply and came over and down. A submarine was surfacing less than a half-mile from the marker. Kent cut in to Operations.

"Target One, this is Blue Duck. Do you read me?"

"Blue Duck. We read you five square. Over."

"This is Blue Duck. We are over marker. Unidentified submarine surfacing one half-mile south of marker. Do you have a sub on patrol?"

There was a space of silence, then a harsh voice came on. "Blue Duck, this is Major Adkins. What are you doing out there? Over."

"Blue Duck, we are scouting. Do you have a sub on patrol? Over."

"Blue Duck, we have no submarine out there. Are you armed? Over."

"This is Blue Duck. We are armed. Over."

"Blue Duck, see that submarine does not approach marker. Use force if necessary."

Kent nosed the Voodoo down and lined up on the submarine. He could see no markings on the deck but he did see an anti-aircraft gun. As he came in it started firing. Kent banked and sent the F-101 up and over.

"They think we're bluffing," Spud called across.

"They'll change their mind," Kent said grimly as he lined up again. This time he did not dive in close. He got his radar sight lined up for a close miss and released a rocket. An instant later a great geyser of water lifted close to the bow of the submarine. It kept on toward the marker, but Kent could see activity on the deck. He went over with shells screaming past him and on up for a turn.

Operations was calling insistently. Kent switched off the channel. He lined up and set his sight. The second rocket sent water boiling over the submarine.

As the F-101 went up and over Spud called excitedly, "They're crash diving."

As he came around Kent saw the conning tower of the submarine plunge under the surface.

"Why didn't you sink her?" Spud shouted.

Kent was too busy answering Major Adkins to reply. Two other jets had joined them and were circling. One of them called across to Kent.

"We too late for the show?"

"Too late," Kent answered. Then he went back to answering Major Adkins' questions.

"I'll be in in a few minutes and report. Your jets have taken over."

Twenty minutes later Spud and Kent were in the major's room at Operations. The major was as angry as any man could get.

"Imagine a stunt like that? They must have had a way of towing that cone or diving with the marker. All we'd have found was water. We'd have marked it down as another lost nose cone."

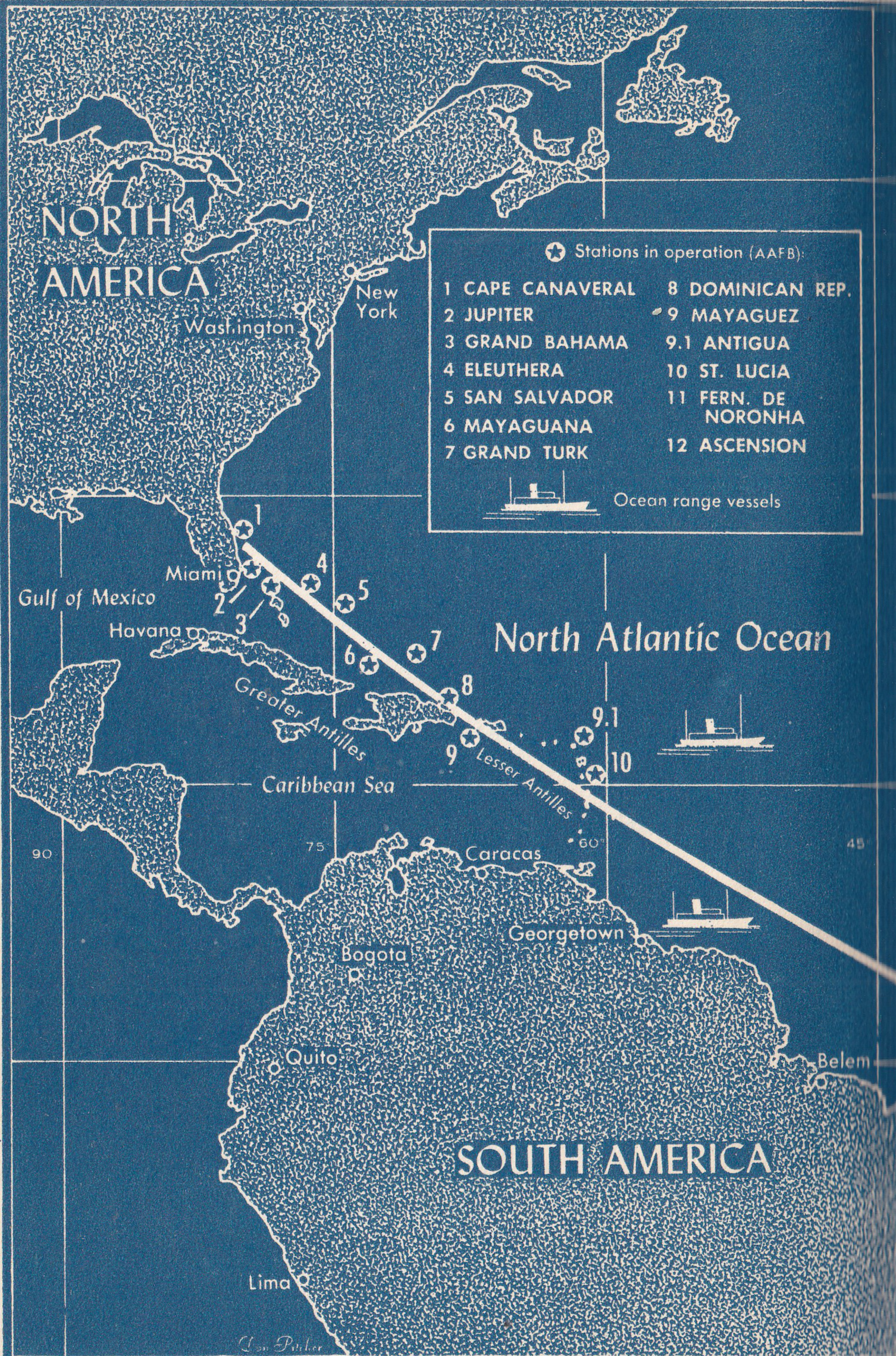
"They had it figured out," Kent admitted. "Next time you better add a sub detector."

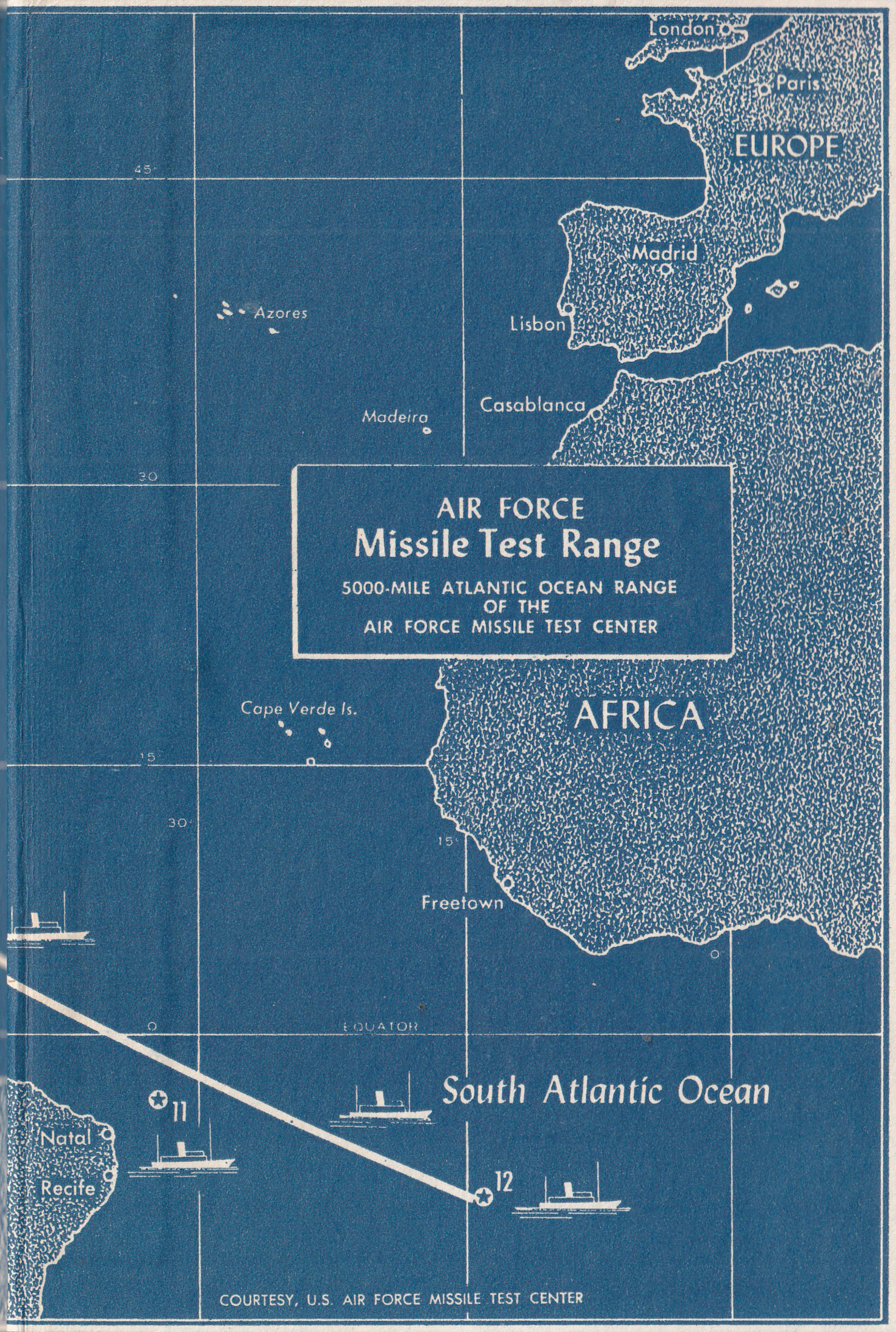
"You guessed they might use a sub?" Major Adkins asked.

"That was my wild hunch. When we could not find a boat out there the night we saw the signals I got to wondering." Kent grinned at the major.

"By the way," Adkins said. "You're to call Colonel Jefferys at once." He smiled broadly. "He probably has a medal for you."

"More likely to be another sticky mission. Colonel Jefferys does not hand out medals." Both Kent and Spud laughed.





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